

*By the Same Author*

LIVING BY THE PEN  
SHORT STORIES: HOW TO  
WRITE THEM  
AUTHOR-BIOGRAPHY  
THE HOWLER BOOKS

*Novels*

THE FAIR DAUGHTER  
OLD BARTY  
PADDY FOR NEWS  
LATE DAWNING

# WHY EDITORS REGRET

By  
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*Fiction Editor of "The Daily Mail"  
and "The Evening News"*



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## CHAPTER I

### THIS BOOK AND ITS INTENTIONS

The Scope of this Book—That Alleged 'Vicious Circle'—The Editorial View-point—Criticism and the Beginner—Intelligent Marketing is Necessary even when Talent is Pronounced.

THIS book differs so widely from the majority of text-books designed to help literary and journalistic aspirants that I wish to state its purpose explicitly and at once.

In my books *Short Stories: How to Write Them* and *Living by the Pen*. I endeavoured to assist aspirants and to encourage the competent with advice drawn from a fairly comprehensive and often painful experience.

In this volume I address myself not so much to the aspirant who has little more than an itch to write as to the undergraduate and graduate in writing who have difficulty in giving saleable shape to their work and possibly show an inability to profit by rejections.

Nothing I say will be useless, I hope, to writers at any stage of their progress, but the

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complete beginner would perhaps be well advised to read first my two books already mentioned.

It is the loudly voiced complaint of many thousands of writers that they never know why their contributions are rejected. As the editor will never tell them, but sends only an uninformative slip, how can they ever improve? They say that it is a vicious circle.

I doubt whether a manufacturer of an article would adopt quite the same attitude if the public did not buy his article; I doubt whether he would for one moment expect the housewife and the business man to say why they rejected his product and bought another. But creative workers are seldom businesslike—or even entirely rational as regards their work—and I do not altogether condemn them for that. Their attitude and temperament, however, do require guidance and encouragement, and it is this help that I will try to supply.

As one who collected an unbroken stream of rejection slips for two years I am not unaware of the beginner's feelings or of the complaint, "If only editors would tell us what they want!

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But, of course, they never know their own minds, and if they did they're always changing."

Quite. But now for the answers.

I want this book to show that

- (a) The percentage of fools is not higher among editors than elsewhere, and certainly not higher than among would-be contributors.
- (b) Certain basic principles govern good editing.
- (c) Many reasons for rejection could be discovered by perceptive writers.
- (d) Other reasons which cannot always be discovered or conveyed can be, and are, outlined here.
- (e) An appreciation of the editorial viewpoint is essential to successful selling.

I picked up recently *The Natives are Friendly*, a novel by Colin Howard. It describes the adventures and attempts of a young provincial writer to break into Fleet Street and national markets. My heart warmed to the author when I read this passage:

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"Mr Dorrington, I have great hopes of you," announced Hugh. "As you are probably aware, every aspiring humorist is convinced that he and Wodehouse have identical styles. He turns out pages of painful facetiousness, and is honestly surprised when he gets them back while they go on publishing Wodehouse. Finally—plots! What have you to say on the subject of plots?"

"That they're most bloody exasperating——" began Martin, with sudden heat.

"Enough!" interrupted Hugh. "Don't worry. It's only a question of time with you. You're not, thank God, one of those gifted lads who press a manuscript of theirs upon you—maybe you'd like to read it and let them have your opinion on it. Several people have read it and thought very highly of it. He's a little undecided where to send it—perhaps you could suggest somewhere? It must be a magazine with a good name, and they must pay well. They must allow him to choose, the illustrator, too. Well, you read the manuscript through, and then you read it again in case you missed the plot the first time. You didn't. There isn't a plot. You point the omission out to the young author. He smiles superiorly and explains, 'Oh, a plot isn't necessary if you've got style. Look at Chekov. Of course, some people *have* to have a plot. They couldn't hold the readers' interest without one. Myself, I never bother with one.' Sheer damned laziness! My God, they annoy me!"



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It is for the Martins of the writing world that this book is intended.

Editors are not all fools, and they are not by any means a class prejudiced against beginners or suspicious of them. They are critical of inefficiency and of writers who, though competent in their production, show a complete ignorance of editorial requirements. Editors are human, and therefore occasionally make mistakes. It is not to be deduced from this admission that because a script once rejected is ultimately bought the editor is guilty of ignorance or negligence. It could be either, but it might be brilliant editing. Circumstances alter cases, and no form of published writing or editing can ever be static and healthy.

As one who has for years handled many thousands of manuscripts, from news paragraphs in trade papers to academic treatises, from short stories to novels, from scripts by unknown unemployed to manuscripts bearing the autographs of celebrities, I have always tried to be helpful, encouraging, and constructively critical within the limits imposed by the pressure of the job. The sheer volume of work prevents

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individual treatment in all cases, and many of us so minded are deterred from good works by contributors themselves.

Accepting the fact that to imperceptive contributors the rejection slip may symbolize a vicious circle, I have often tried to break that circle by adding brief comment or criticism. Too often has the alleged circle thus cut snapped back in my face like a broken spring.

The contributor, instead of accepting the criticism in the spirit prompting it, returns to the charge with long, argumentative, and accusing letters which are too wearying to be borne.

Let me say at once that many do appreciate and profit by even such brief criticism, but there are a multitude who do not, and I can well understand the attitude of many well-meaning and far from difficult editors who have at length decided that it is not worth encouraging anything but outstanding promise.

For myself I shall continue to try to help in the face of continual rebuff, if only to persuade myself that I am still young and resilient and not without remembrance of my own heart-breaking apprenticeship.

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I envy the successful man of letters who, as Anthony Trollope suggests in his *Autobiography*, is "subject to no bonds such as those which bind other men." He is more free as to hours than the judge or the Prime Minister himself, and his work "may be done on the top of a mountain or in the bottom of a pit." And he, Trollope adds, "can enter doors which are closed against almost all but him and the wealthy."

An enviable position indeed, but a very rare one, and one beyond the reach of most of us, who have a feeling that we resemble more the fallible and human individual of Kipling's lines in *Delilah*:

He wrote for certain papers, which as everybody  
knows,  
Is worse than serving in a shop or scaring off the  
crows.

Such humanity admitted, there is no sin—indeed, much virtue—in a desire to market one's wares intelligently and successfully, and to see that one's capacities are properly developed and their fruits acceptable to editors and publishers.

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There is nothing incompatible with integrity in this.

I suppose if creative art can be said to enter into mechanics a luxury car is a good example, but Rolls-Royce see every reason for supplementing art and ensuring its widest acceptance (and financial return) by scientific designing and marketing based upon a thorough and imaginative study of their potential public.

Is your work of such excellence and universal appeal that you can afford to do less?

## CHAPTER II

# STUDY EDITORIAL REQUIREMENTS AND POLICY

The Qualifications of an Editor—An Essential Urge—The Sixth Sense—Servant, but not Slave—Personality in Publications—Expert Analysis Essential to Success.

It should be admitted by all but the most blindly prejudiced that editing does call for some special qualifications. I suppose that there is no profession against which the futile accusation "Any fool could do that" is levelled more frequently than against writing and editing in all their varied manifestations.

There is no profession to which it truly applies less.

Many a man can turn successfully from one trade to another because the possession of sound business instincts is more important than the specific technical knowledge, which can be comparatively quickly acquired. Writing is different.

Continually the envious cry is raised: "Oh, he's a born journalist," or "a born writer."

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No writer is born, and certainly no journalist.

What *can* be born in a person—and, indeed, I believe, must be to ensure success and satisfaction—is the urge to write, to edit, or to publish.

Many people make a financial success of writing with no apparent urge; others secure administrative prominence in the world of letters after success in an entirely different field. But I believe that to secure the success of self-expression and realization writing must to some extent be a vocation. It may not always be realized at the outset, but the urge must be there.

Yet, granted that urge, there is incredibly much to learn.

Industry is essential, and also an ability to adapt experience skilfully for one's own benefit. A clear, logical brain is required, and a knowledge of men—and women. R. D. Blumenfeld, one of the outstanding editors of popular journalism, always insists that among an editor's equipment must be the God-given gift to suffer fools gladly.

It is, of course, impossible, in trying to present a picture of the editorial mind, to be specific. The editor may control a great national news-

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paper, a local paper in a remote island, or a weekly journal dealing with aquariums. The publisher may present academic theses, best-sellers translated into a score of languages, tracts, time-tables, or comic annuals for children.

Yet, admitting this vast range, it is still reasonable to insist upon imagination, a broadness of vision, and an informed tolerance among editorial qualifications.

There must certainly be a highly developed sense of accuracy and a general knowledge that exceeds the average. The editor not only acquires a sixth sense, which enables him often to suspect plagiarism, but also gradually attains a very considerable knowledge of the law and an unusually sensitive social conscience.

In my own position, for example, I receive many otherwise usable stories which would give considerable offence, and in many cases run grave risk, if they ever appeared in print. It is quite impossible to calculate the unwelcome repercussions of many stories sent to me in all good faith as suitable for publication. In flagrant instances, of course, the editor acts for his own safety, but authors will never know how many

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risks they have been saved from by judicious editing.

It is often claimed by thoughtless contributors that an editor is a slave to his public. Rejected contributors and novel-writers may derive some comfort from this claim if they care, but it is not very sensible or very helpful.

The editor is the *servant* of his public, but not the slave—a very different thing. The doctor is the servant of his public, but that does not mean he is its slave or that he gives patients necessarily what they demand.

It cannot be too heavily underlined that the editor is the servant of *his* public—*his specific public*. If he is a good editor he knows his public far better than do his potential contributors. The measure of his success is his ability to perceive their particular requirements and to cater for them, but his task is more than a negative fulfilment. The good editor and publisher lead their public, broaden their public, anticipate its needs, while never forgetting that there are limits beyond which they cannot go until they have an indication that their readers are ready for them.



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The purchaser is the final adjudicator. There is—in this country at least—no compulsion to buy any printed matter. Kissing still goes by favour. The editor and publisher set out metaphorically to deserve the kisses of their particular public. The successful writers and contributors are those who aid this process.

It is often claimed that certain groups of publishers, certain groups of periodicals or newspapers, are all 'much of a muchness.' They may be to the untutored eye, but to the expert eye—and expertness must be acquired by the successful writer—they are very different. Each has an individual personality, and that personality is not a reflection of the personality of the editor.

Let me explain this point, because it is rather important.

Groups of publications catering for the same public must of necessity bear considerable resemblance. There is, alas! also much imitation. Imitation comes from the second-bests in the field. The leader leads, and its success is a reflection of the individuality, the enterprise, the imagination, of its editor or publisher. The

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leader in any field has more personality than its rivals, but that personality is not necessarily the editor's own personality; it is his editorial personality.

There are, unfortunately, some publications edited for the proprietor or the proprietor's wife rather than for the public, but such cannot be cited for general guidance.

Some contributors say that you do not write for an editor's public, but for the man or woman in charge. In the sense that you have to appreciate his or her view-point they are right; in the sense that you have to appeal to the editor's own personal likes and dislikes they are wrong.

Personal preferences, prejudices, and whimsicalities have to be submerged in the good editor. A man's national instincts, his religious principles, his politics, his taste in reading, his preference for animals, his class of society, his moral code, his mode of living, should not be allowed to influence his judgment upon editorial matters. He is buying for some one else. The good greengrocer does not refuse to stock peas because they give him indigestion; the

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successful car manufacturer does not decline to manufacture tourers because he prefers a saloon.

If individual markets show individual preference—and they should—these preferences should be the outcome of mature and informed editorial judgment, not of individual personal preferences.

To the thoughtless beginners all publishing houses look alike. They admit that certain firms specialize in, say, religious publications, others in school-books or works of a technical nature; but the fiction houses seem to publish anything. How wrong this is any student of marketing will tell you.

There is as much difference between the products of the general publishers as there is between the products of the many car manufacturers. If you want a sports car with exciting acceleration and a sense of infinite power you will find that the manufacturers of such are only a few. If you want a family car with reliability, comfort, and steadiness, and with danger—even the sense of danger—reduced to the minimum, your choice is also limited.

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It is the same with publishing houses. Even if this assertion does not concern every reader I ask every reader to accept it as truth. Without an acceptance of the fact that these vital and ascertainable differences do exist no writer can ever hope for the fullest recognition of his or her talents in any field.

### CHAPTER III

## FAVOURITISM—THE EXCUSE OF THE INCOMPETENT

Favouritism: Fiction and the Facts—It is the Script that counts—Eloquent Figures—The Innumerable Unwanted—No Sex Bar to Success—Unrivalled Scope for Women To-day.

It is probable that one of the reasons most frequently assigned to rejection is favouritism.

Many do not hesitate to claim that literary success is simply a question of getting into the right circle and of keeping there by assiduous cultivation of the right people.

A typical view was expressed in a letter I received recently. The writer, a man of education, said that he had been told by numerous author friends and several schools of journalism that his work was as good as any published, and considerably better than much that appeared in print.

He had now been told that success was not a question of merit at all, but of favouritism.

Could I, as an editor, tell him if such was the fact?

I told him that the suggestion was arrant nonsense; that here and there, perhaps, favouritism was wrongly allowed to sway judgment; that occasionally scripts were bought upon the face-value not of the material, but of the fair contributor. But if such things did not happen now and then journalism would be unique among trades, professions, and vocations of the world. It would be celestial instead of terrestrial.

I told him that every editor worth his salt was eager to buy the right material, no matter whence it came, but it must be what he and his public thought was suitable, not what the contributor thought they ought to have.

Always believing in specific instance rather than in generalization, I told him that I had frequently published in *The Daily Mail* and *The Evening News* first short stories and even first novels by unknown writers. It was scarcely reasonable, in face of such a fact, to allege favouritism as an essential to success.

Many of my contributors have become my

friends, but I cannot recall any friends who have become contributors because of friendship with me. I can think of a number of close friends who suffer almost unbroken rejection at my hands.

For myself—and many others will endorse my attitude—I have the strongest objection to friendships and the personal element intruding upon business. I will encourage a writer who shows promise with advice and personal interviews, if such are likely to be of assistance. I prefer to be on friendly terms with my tried contributors; we can do so much to help each other.

It may surprise many readers to know that some contributors exploit the personal touch with irritating frequency and in most objectionable form. I am frequently offered a manuscript with a letter threatening that if it is not accepted the author will end it all. Others claim unknown 'mutual' friendships, influential contacts in high places, or personal crises. It is not unusual, indeed, for manuscripts to be accompanied by harrowing letters, rate demands, doctors' bills, etc.

Recently, after refuting a general charge of

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favouritism by an unsuccessful writer, I analysed the previous hundred stories I had bought for *The Evening News*.

Of this number thirteen were by definite 'beginners, several to my knowledge having sold fewer than half a dozen stories in their lives. (Most of these stories, of course, were subject to revision before acceptance.) Sixty-four came direct from authors, thirty-six from agents.

Of this hundred I had never seen or spoken to the authors of sixty-one of them.

I discovered that twenty-one of the hundred were by women and that twelve were by writers living abroad.

At the same time an analysis of the last hundred stories purchased for *The Daily Mail* gave these equally convincing figures: Sixty-eight were from authors, thirty-two from agents. Eleven were by beginners. I had never seen or spoken to fifty-six of the hundred. Twenty-two of the stories were by women, and eight of the authors resided abroad.

Favouritism, I submit, on these figures does not get a hearing.

It may be instructive to add that, despite the



overwhelming stream of manuscripts, my department will often go a whole week (in which the consumption of stories varies from six to twelve) without buying a single story. This, remember, is in the face of an annual submission of never fewer than 15,000 and often over 20,000 manuscripts.

Of course, there are every week many stories that could be bought without disaster, but these are not what an editor wants. What an editor wants, whether he or she is editing *The Lancet*, *The Times*, *Home Chat*, *The Hardware Trade Journal*, or *The Rainbow*, is the contribution that causes him or her to say, "Just what we're looking for. I must have that. It's right up our street." The phrasing, no doubt, will vary considerably, but the sentiment will be the same.

The contributor who can produce that reaction in an editor or publisher has a claim far exceeding friendship, female allure, or friends at Court.

It may be appropriate at this stage to anticipate a criticism that some may raise in ignorance. The fact that in the analyses I cited women do not figure so prominently as men

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is not to be interpreted as indicating a prejudice against them.

There have never been such vast opportunities for women in writing as there are to-day, and when I talk of opportunities I include staff journalism and publishing. Holders of staff jobs may not receive rejections in the form of editorial slips, but if their writing fails continually to please they will receive permanent rejection in the form of dismissal.

There are to-day notable women novelists, editors, star reporters, war correspondents, critics, scenario writers, dramatists, advertisement writers, and publicists. Women to-day succeed in all these spheres of writing that were once the exclusive province of men.

A profession with so many women operating in its highest branches must obviously have need for many thousands of women in its lesser ranks—amateurs, if you like—spare-time writers who bring their special experience, their freshness and individuality, to a craft that can never be static, conservative, or hidebound.

It is scarcely surprising that in the analyses I cited male contributors predominate in actual

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numbers, because thousands of men were established free-lances before the War, whereas with women spare-time writing is a comparatively recent occupation.

The range of women's publications has never been greater: women's interests are catered for more and more by newspapers and magazines and by the radio. Women's own world has widened with such astounding rapidity that even the pioneer emancipators must be amazed.

And some one has to write every word that appears for women to read.

To the woman who persists in declaring that her sex is a handicap and the cause of her rejection I would say this: "Write under a male name." The only trouble is that this procedure might reveal, not the editorial prejudice which exists securely in your imagination, but the unsuitability of your work which exists in fact.

## CHAPTER IV

### COMMON SENSE IN MARKETING

Conforming to Editorial Practice—Efficient Marketing—An Editor's Shop-window—Superficially Unsuitable Manuscripts are continually rejected—  
Advice to Authors from E. V. Lucas.

THERE are many occasions when an editor regrets that manuscripts are not even superficially suitable.

It is unlikely that much valuable material is overlooked because of its unprepossessing appearance or its entirely unsuitable length, but it is possible that much talent escapes encouragement because an editor cannot face a manuscript so obviously unsuitable.

In any case it is essential that every potential contributor should realize the necessity for discovering the elementary rules of the game and for observing them.

In favourably reviewing one of my previous books a reputable critic suggested that my chapter on the preparation of manuscripts and the observance of the common-sense routine of

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the craft was, perhaps, unduly elementary. \* I wish it was true, but, alas! experience suggests otherwise.

There used to be a saying that it took a rich man to wear a shabby coat. Perhaps that is why the book manuscripts of one of the outstanding best-selling novelists since the War would be a disgrace to an unknown and impecunious author in the remotest village. The type-face is battered and irregular; the letters are invariably choked. The paper is of an unusual and ungainly size, the ribbon is generally worn so as to be almost a stencil impression in many places, and the spelling is refreshingly original.

If this is fame's idiosyncrasy I see no reason or justification whatever for it. Certainly it is not the example to be followed by those who have no assurance that their work will be good, however disreputable its presentation.

I do not propose to repeat here my earlier advice on preparation of manuscripts, but to insist upon the essential value of efficient marketing if for no other reason than the fact that lack of observance brings innumerable rejections.

Now, one of the occasions I will go to great

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lengths to avoid is shopping with women—or, rather, waiting for them while they shop. I have no very high opinion of women's shopping methods and the attitude of mind in which they approach the problem. Even so, I have never yet heard of a woman going into a hair-dresser's shop and asking whether they sold pineapples.

Most women, unless they are writers, look in the window or ascertain the nature of the shop beforehand.

Now, all editors have a shop-window, and some even dress them attractively at times. Yet do writers, and especially would-be contributors, ever look at them?

I sometimes wonder, for no week passes without at least one person ringing up and asking, "Do you ever use short stories in the *Mail* or the *News*?"

And when they are answered by a secretary trained to repress all her healthy indignation they say, "Oh, how interesting! And what length?"

In the week during which I started writing this chapter a London literary agent sent me

two stories by a young woman novelist of considerable repute. Apart from being of an entirely unsuitable type, the stories were less than half the length required, and were accompanied by a covering letter which wondered "whether you publish short stories in the *News*."

Short stories—of easily ascertained length and type—had at that time been appearing for three and a half years without a break.

One cannot imagine the reason why a writer of high promise and considerable performance should give her work to such an agent.

I have the respect born of experience for efficient agents, but I must confess that several of the leading organizations offend regularly on such elementary points as length.

To meet my fiction requirements I am frequently offered manuscripts ten or even twenty times as long as I can ever accommodate, with a sprinkling of poetry, articles, tracts, potted novels, and other worthy but unwanted manuscripts.

It might be thought that this failing—admittedly bad marketing—is but a trivial annoyance. I mention it because the offence can do

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such harm to an author's reputation. An editor is only human, and if all the stories he ever sees by a certain author are wildly beyond his limits he is apt to associate the fault with the author rather than with the offending agent.

Although some modern novelists do not know where to stop—or where to begin, for that matter—there are as a rule very definite limits to all types of published writing, and in the case of newspapers and many periodicals the limits of space are inexorable.

It does not help a contributor to imagine that an editor has wilfully and maliciously cut a script in a futile endeavour to prove that it is better thus condensed.

The editor is up against hard facts which refuse to yield even to the urgencies of creative art.

Perhaps I may add a personal plea under this heading of superficially unsuitable submissions. It is the menace of the insanitary manuscript, and inquiry of colleagues in varied spheres of editing suggests that I am not singled out for this unpleasantness.

Many manuscripts are filthy beyond descrip-



tion, and the normal-minded writer can have no conception of the fantastic parcels received by editors and publishers who cater for a large public.

I have received stories on the backs of bills and on pages with the remains of meals upon them, while some were so dirty that it was revolting to handle them.

A couple of years ago I endured a sequence of submissions from a person we eventually named "the decomposing man." Each one got smellier and smellier—a nauseating, decaying smell, so penetrating that they were recognized before the envelope was opened.

At last the situation became unendurable, and the manuscripts were marked up and rejected immediately, so that the boy who brought in the packet took it out again at once. I am always prepared to learn that by so doing I missed a series of masterpieces.

Judges still, on certain occasions, carry posies. The custom was originally conceived so that their lordships might escape the smells of their surroundings. No such happy thought has survived in Fleet Street. In its absence I shall

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continue to take the risk of passing over a best-seller.

So far I have not received anything quite so imaginative as the novel sent to a friend editing a Society weekly. It was written on the back of assorted sheets of wallpaper.

In order that this note of seeming levity may not destroy the gravity of the truth it contains I record, with permission, some apposite comments by Mr E. V. Lucas in *Zigzag*, the magazine of the house of Methuen.

Mr Lucas, distinguished alike as publisher and author, has been reading for publishers for over forty years. Much of his advice might equally be deemed elementary if facts did not underline the absolute necessity for its reiteration.

He offers, "in default of the record of profound, and even imaginative, discernment which might perhaps be expected of me, a few aphoristic remarks . . . all bearing less on the past than on the present and future."

Here are some of his points, which every editor and publisher will endorse, even though they may not all possess Mr Lucas's felicity of expression:

## COMMON SENSE IN MARKETING

No professional Reader can any longer take his duties lightly. There is too much rivalry.

The firm of Methuen alone has, for several years, received on an average fifty manuscripts a week, each of which has to come under examination. More of them than I consider worthy have eventually been published—somewhere else.

The first thing that a Reader should forget is his private literary prejudice; or, if you like it better, the last thing that a Reader should remember is his own preference in books.

The typewritten copy being complete, it would be better if the Author did not have it bound so tightly that the first words of each line have to be guessed at.

There is much virtue in margins.

Every manuscript should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Quite often one or more of these ingredients is missing.

Too many manuscripts begin well.

It is better that the manuscripts of novels should be under 300,000 words long.

Poetry must be very good or unusual.

Sonnets are rarely smiled upon.

It is well that not more than three studies of Napoleon should appear in the same year.

One Reader's poison is another Reader's meat.

Before submitting their manuscripts to publishing firms Authors should consider the character of those firms. Agents might think of this too.

In a facetious manuscript it is not an absolute

augury of success to call one of the characters "Uncle Podgers."

Agents who have submitted a manuscript to, say, Messrs Chatto and Windus should not, when after its return from Messrs Chatto and Windus they send it to Messrs Methuen and Co., leave Messrs Chatto and Windus's rejection form inside.

As to Mr Lucas's last point, I frequently receive manuscripts bearing previous rejection slips. Occasionally the writer's record card is unfortunately attached, so that we can secretly enjoy all the details of its previous travels. I was once offered a novel script by an author of international repute—a man whose name is genuinely a household word—and inside it was a rival editor's letter of rejection to the agents.

This can, of course, be charmingly called the fallible human touch that makes life interesting.

It can also be called astoundingly bad business. Take your choice. Your selection, unless you are a writer so exalted that men and women are waiting for your words, will influence your success.

## CHAPTER V

# PRINCIPLES OF NEWSPAPER MARKETS

Principles of Newspaper Markets—Relative Values  
—Changing Perspectives in News Values—Editorial  
Suggestions—Competition Ideas—Pictorial Possi-  
bilities.

WHILE the basic principles of rejection are, in the main, common to all spheres of writing, the particular revelation of them varies so considerably according to circumstance that the inexperienced eye may not recognize the similarity. Further, the particular requirements and conditions of a specific field may produce additional reasons for rejection.

In this chapter I shall confine myself to the newspaper markets, one of the largest fields for the potential writer, for in its widest sense it covers not only the vast collection of daily, evening, and weekly newspapers produced for the general public, but the thousands of specialized publications catering for the needs of hundreds of thousands who have

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business or recreational interests in a particular subject.

The basis of almost all such publication is news, and it should be remembered, in taking this wide survey, that the essence of news is not necessarily its recording within a few minutes, or even within a few hours, of its happening. The basis of news, from the customer's point of view, is the first receipt of the information by him or the first amplification of news so that its particular interest to him is revealed. That, even nowadays, despite the radio, and through circumstances of situation, may be weeks after the actual occurrence.

It is as well also that the contributor of news in any form should realize, in addition to an appreciation of the time factor, the value of the relative interests.

A fire occurs in a Yorkshire factory. Two employees are killed and several firemen injured.

A national daily paper in its London edition might dismiss it in three or four paragraphs, unless the fire was spectacular, the rescues daring, or the dead of special significance. In its

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Northern edition the account would be much more extensive, and in addition to the names and addresses of the dead and injured would record, if possible, the nature of the injuries and the progress of the patients in hospital.

A trade journal interested in that manufacturer's goods would want the brief details of the effect of the fire upon the firm's business. The editor's wholesale and retail readers would desire to know first of all whether delivery of goods would be affected.

A machinery journal might be interested in the performance of a new fire-fighting apparatus known to be used for the first time at that fire. A local paper in the district where the dead and injured parties resided would want the fullest report, with eyewitness accounts, and if possible statements from the injured.

This does not exhaust the possibilities of an item comparatively small from the standpoint of national news, and it takes no account of the picture side. It will, however, possibly be sufficient to set the potential contributor's mind working on the right lines.

There is always the chance that the most

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ingenuous beginner—indeed, the man in the street who has never thought anything of news except as a reader or a listener—may stumble upon a first-class story. It is always possible, even in these days, for a passer-by to be upon the scene of an isolated accident involving a well-known personage or even royalty.

Any newspaper editor will admit that some of the most amazing scoops in his experience have come from very unlikely sources. But such occurrences must obviously be rare.

It follows that the major stories—royal news, political happenings, national religious happenings, Society movements, and the like—will almost always come through important connexions, through staff representatives or accredited correspondents or the leading news agencies.

No organization, however extensive, can hope to cover everything, but it follows that the contributions of the outsider, or even of the regular but unattached correspondent, must be mainly confined to the smaller happenings or occasions when chance gives favours.

There must inevitably be many occasions



when rejection of such a story, or its non-appearance in print, seems inexplicable to the elated sender.

Many sound reasons are not apparent to the outsider. It often happens that a news editor has had the news in hand for days or even weeks before the outsider sends it. Nothing has been published because the news editor is building up the full story, of which the outside contributor has written from but one angle. Again, it may happen that the news editor knows that the development of other related or dependent news, of which the contributor has no knowledge, may render publication inopportune or even legally dangerous.

The correspondent, in a natural desire to be alert, is often apt to over-estimate the value of news that appears large to him upon the scene, and also, alas! to overlook the value of local news which, had he sent it in sufficient detail, could have been used to contribute towards a national story of considerable importance.

The considerations of space govern rejections even in newspapers. The 'silly season' is a phrase known even to the man in the street.

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Indeed, many pretend to use it derisively without being able to say when the season occurs. What no one outside a newspaper office can appreciate, however, is the disconcerting difference in the volume of news, not only from one season to another, but from one day to another, and, indeed, from one hour to another.

Never have the crises of news been more frequent than they are to-day. The increasing importance of international affairs and the almost theatrical drama of modern politics are largely responsible for this.

Foreign news, except on rare occasions, of which some warning was invariably given, was once a comparatively sedate field. Nowadays, with the annihilation of distance, the increased *tempo* of living, and the frenzied state of the world, foreign news is fiercely insistent, and a major contributor to the unevenness of news pressure.

There are other occasions when a newspaper will make a feature of a certain type of news or confine its interest in a certain subject to a particular angle of approach. This may take the

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form of special supplements, features, or editorial campaigns.

During the run of such special efforts other secondary news, and particularly news upon the certain subject from a different angle, will be subordinated. This is no reprehensible practice. If a greengrocer makes a special display of oranges other fruits are for the period subordinated. They are not missing, and those who want them will know that they are there.

These details, necessarily sketchy, will serve their purpose if they convince the outsider that there are many sound reasons why his seemingly interesting suggestion or contribution is rejected. The last cause he will attribute it to, if he is sensible, is lack of interest or attention.

In the exuberance of youth I sent a number of suggestions to newspapers. Many must have been immature, and none were accepted, though several drew letters of interest explaining that for various reasons they were not workable.

Since I have been on the inside I have seen a constant stream of suggestions and contributions sifted and thoughtfully considered. Not one in

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a hundred draws a full letter, though that is not for lack of interest, but entirely through intense pressure of work. I have seen suggestions from complete outsiders passed to three or four directors for comments, and still the recipient of the rejected idea probably thinks it was looked at only by the office-boy.

I have seen ideas from outsiders received one morning and put into execution the same night, and I have seen many conferences upon suggestions from complete strangers.

The truth is, of course, that no publication can exist without ideas or be slack in considering them, whatever their origin. No editor of any newspaper, magazine, or journal imagines that all the bright ideas he will ever want are possessed by his staff. Any staff suffering from such mental constipation would soon see the circulation declining.

Perhaps one more word may be helpful here to many. It is that countless editorial suggestions, good in themselves, must perforce be rejected because of mechanical difficulties. Modern printing is among the marvels of mechanical art, and there is little it cannot attempt in its own field;

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but it has its limitations, which, although very real and very apparent to the inside man, are often too technical to explain.

Another point concerns competitions and stunts. I suppose every live publication, daily, weekly, monthly, or annual, receives innumerable suggestions for editorial competitions.

There is no more ticklish subject. From the legal point of view alone competitions nowadays are hedged about with dangers and difficulties. From the point of view of the watertightness and the satisfaction of every entrant they are one of the major problems of an editor's or a publisher's life.

Only when one has been involved in competitions on a large scale—a newspaper competition may bring 250,000 entries, even a garment-making competition 100,000 incredible parcels—can half the technical and legal difficulties be understood, the dangers foreseen and guarded against, the unwelcome eventualities reduced to a minimum. \*

It is one thing to evolve a competition idea that seems quite workable in the home and pleasing to one's circle of friends. It is a very

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different thing to make the basic idea invulnerable to a mass attack by the public.

One of the acid tests of a competition for a large public is that no entrant shall feel dissatisfied. The bestowal of the most handsome prizes will be wasted if unsuccessful competitors do not feel that they have had a fair deal.

Another curious aspect of the submission of ideas is that their originators, or, rather, their temporary possessors, always imagine that a crystal-clear brainwave has come solely and exclusively to them. It is not to be expected that they would be in contact with the many markets that might have used a similar or an allied idea in the past. No; the inspiration came direct and urgently to them with the exclusiveness of a shaft of sunlight in a tiny room.

Alas, it is not so. Even the greatest ideas are in part derivative. It must inevitably be so, and there must just as inevitably be duplication. Because a person submits an idea to a publication and it is rejected, and later on, perhaps after years, another publication (or even the same publication) utilizes a similar idea, it does not mean that the clerk who opened your letter is in

the secret pay of the opposition and took your idea across the road. It does not mean that the original recipient thought your suggestion good, and that if it were put into cold storage for a year or two it could be used without your knowing and without a sense of obligation or a necessity for payment.

It has not been my experience that journalists in any branch of publication are less honourable than other men, and they have certainly less time than most for giving deception a thought. And it is still true that idleness is one of the greatest corrupters of morals.

Please don't write in and tell me you had thought of that yourself. I penned it deliberately to remind you that not only great minds run in grooves. But remember it the next time a rejection slip comes. If you do, and remember also its application to the issue in hand, my deliberately poor platitude will not be without its use.

While I shall mention in a later chapter some of the factors governing feature and fiction 'rejections, as distinct from those connected with news items, it may be suitable here to record one

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ever-present factor in the rejection of many excellent contributions and ideas.

I refer to a previous point made—the inexorable limits of space.

Not occasionally, but every week, editors and directors turn down contributions and ideas which they are ready to admit are excellent. Their question, put with genuine regret, is, “Where can we find room for them?” And the answer so often is, “We can’t.”

I have mentioned the incredible and unparalleled encroachment of foreign news and features upon newspaper and periodical space. In a sense ‘encroachment’ is perhaps not the right word, because it suggests an unwelcome intruder; yet it is fully justified from the point of view of the reader’s interest. The intruding element comes when the final limits of space are assessed.

For purposes of specific example consider the demands upon a daily newspaper’s space to-day as compared with demands before the War.

Then, for purposes of rough division, there were the predominating home news and a much subordinated foreign news. The main sports, from the point of view of general interest, were



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cricket and football, and there were sections devoted to books, the theatre, art, music, gardening, and fashions, with such comparatively minor sections, according to the particular interests of the paper concerned, as fishing, hunting, etc.

To-day, even with larger papers, the pressure is incredible. None of these former interests has died or appreciably diminished, but they are supplemented by illustrations, motoring, radio, television, greyhound racing, dirt-track racing, ice hockey, mothercraft, diet, travel, and aviation, to say nothing of beauty treatment, gliding, crosswords, etc.

Only harassed editors and publishers know the full meaning of this acute problem, which is bound to increase with the growing scarcity of paper supplies. If contributors and potential contributors would occasionally bear it in mind it would withdraw their thought from high dudgeon and leave them free to pursue more constructive lines.

It is impossible to close even these few general remarks without reference to illustrations.

Pictures are becoming more and more a vital part of publishing. The general rules for rejection

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apply to them, plus some especial mechanical ones that need not trouble the beginner. The speed and competition, however, particularly in the newspaper field, keep all but the exceptionally well-situated and efficient from thinking that they ever stand a chance against staff photographers, the many brilliant agencies, and the amazing organization of a newspaper's national resources. The outsider who would avoid unnecessary rejections should remember his limitations—and see also his possibilities. Certainly from a local angle he has continual and close contact with activities and personalities which only become national news occasionally. Let him remember that always, and not wait until the big story breaks and then feel disgruntled because the experts are ahead of him.

Rejections are continual on the score of time and because of the better quality or suitability of the professionally produced article served up in exactly the right form and at exactly the right moment.

Other things being equal, one of the secrets of acceptance rather than rejection in Press photography is action.

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If every potential contributor to publications—yes, and to the novel field—would remember that letters are not dead but living things, that newspapers, periodicals, and books want to present a living, pulsating article, there would be fewer rejections and fewer misjudgments of the editorial mind.

Let readers make into a theme song the thought that writing and editorial requirements can never be static, and sing it till they are sick of it. It is a strange truth that we invariably remember our illnesses rather than our healthy days.

After all, every one deals with life itself, and if any potential contributors think the presentation of life—as distinct from the basic desires and emotions of life—is static they had better give up all thought of ever contributing anything to publications but their purchase price. Certainly they had better give up any attempt to assess the editorial mind and the editorial view-point. Their happiness will lie in very different directions. Between them and us is a great gulf fixed, and it grows gradually wider and wider.

## CHAPTER VI

# POLICY AND ITS EFFECT ON REJECTIONS

Policy and its Effects—Discovering a Publication's Individuality—The Ethically Unsuitable Contributions—Moral Considerations—Style—Scripts with Too Limited an Appeal—When Readers Remember.

ONE of the most frequent reasons for rejection, and one least understood by outsiders, is policy. An appreciation of this fact is really an appreciation of the editorial view-point. It is of unusual importance to all who would succeed in any phase of writing.

Many approach this subject with suspicion, thinking that it is an especial excuse for the rejections that cannot otherwise be justified or explained. Many believe it to be a nebulous, unstable quality, the governing factor of which is the editor's liver.

It will be my object in this chapter not only to reveal the positive side of editorial policy and to justify it, but to remove many misconceptions that prevent the potential writer from grasping

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the subject properly and benefiting by the knowledge.

Emphatically, policy is not just a question of the proprietor's whim, the editor's personal preferences, or the editor's secretary's susceptibilities.

Marketing to-day is an acutely scientific business, and no publication can be a success without realization and acceptance of that fact. A newspaper, a periodical, or a book must, and does, reflect the firm's policy. That there are, from time to time, exceptions to the rule in the products of any house is not a contradiction but rather a confirmation of the general policy. If a product is so different from the usual as to call forth remark it is surely proof that the type with which it makes such surprising comparison is recognizable and consistent.

Our theme song may still be "No form of writing is static," but the publication without a general policy is not likely to be a sustained success.

Let us examine a few typical instances in various fields of writing.

In trade and technical journalism—which

incidentally offers a considerable field to the expert writer—a chemical journal is typical.

Now, in chemistry, as in most other industries, there can be no rigid dividing-line between its various aspects.

The manufacturing magnate may produce crude chemicals in terms of tons entirely for industry, but there will doubtless be by-products of his manufacture which in a more refined form will be consumed by the manufacturer of wholesale products, who in turn will be most interested in the retailer, who in his turn will be very definitely concerned with the public as consumers.

The gay colours now sported by the humblest typist are a direct result of compulsory research in munitions during the Great War. The range of synthetic products to-day is closely knit with the requirements of our major heavy industries. Dividing-lines in the chemical industry, as in any other technical or professional field, are not so much lines as seams.

It might be imagined, therefore, that anything of chemical interest would appeal to any chemical publication. In one sense that is true, but it



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is in a sense that need not concern the outside contributor.

If, for example, one of the captains of the chemical industry died it would be of interest to all phases of the industry in varying degree. You cannot lose a king without the humblest subjects in his farthest possessions being superficially interested, even though they never saw the man or were consciously affected as individuals by his personal activities.

Such major news is never likely to come first to the outsider, and what he is concerned with is diagnosis of the editorial policy of each of the several journals occupying themselves with the chemical industry. Some will be concentrating upon the chemical engineering side, some upon the academic side, some upon wholesale interests and markets; while some will be almost entirely concerned with the vast retail trade and such other activities as affect their retail readers.

Others—the beauty publications are, in a sense, an example—are entirely occupied with adapted chemical products which affect the masses.

I am reminded of my own early ignorance in

such matters. Thinking that the magazine of a great shipping company would be interested in anything to do with the sea and ships, I sent them an article on "Sea Superstitions," most of which were grim and forbidding. As the magazine was read chiefly by passengers this was, as the saying goes, "not so good."

It would be impossible here to analyse in detail the particular personalities and policies of even the major markets in journalism and publishing. In any case the requirements are for ever slightly changing. Besides, this vital research should be done by the contributor himself. It may be possible, however, by a few observations, to set his mind working upon the right lines and to convince him of the need for personal and constant study.

The most successful free-lance known to me intimately studies *every* issue of *every* publication to which he contributes. It is curious that less successful writers deem such labour unnecessary.

*The Times* will concern only a few contributors, and these know its policy and scope too well to need guidance. *The Morning Post* (whose

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fate is undecided as I write) has a distinct individuality. Once essentially a Services paper, a clubman's paper, it has adapted itself to the altered conditions which have to some extent encroached upon a class for which it formerly catered. The paper does, however, continue its traditions by making a deliberate appeal to the public schools and universities. *The Daily Telegraph*, virile as well as dignified, deserves careful study.

*The Daily Herald*, now a first-class newspaper, and far from being the propagandist news-starved sheet that it was in its early, impecunious, yet magnificently virile and courageous days, has still a very definite leaning. Its politics do not colour or cramp its news, but they do naturally affect its perspective. I am not concerned here with politics as such; they should be revealed to any sensible student of the papers themselves, and I make that comment with no sense of criticism. Journalism will be very anæmic when partisanship is taken from it, and the public will be the first to suffer.

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extent of this public is invariably underestimated by many who live in London and imagine the sophistication and modernity of the much-publicized West End to be a criterion of the heart of the nation.

Another house is rapidly covering the market for modern political and economic books and novels with such a background. Others concentrate entirely upon the twopenny library public and pay no deliberate attention to the library subscriber who influences the original seven-and-sixpenny edition. Indeed, many full-length novels are now first published at three-and-six.

So many thousands of rejections every year are the result of the writers' inability to perceive these facts, or, if perceiving them, to profit by the knowledge.

It is necessary for a successful contributor to study his markets continually, for changing times and changing editors will appreciably alter the policy of a newspaper or of a publishing house.

While policy is fluid it may, however, be of use to a large number of my readers to indicate

can never be challenged, its amazing record of courage, and its history of enterprise which is best realized by the continual imitation in its rivals. *The Daily Express* has a personality all its own. *The News Chronicle*, once essentially a stronghold of nonconformity and a paper for the literary-minded (very marked in both *The Daily News* and *The Daily Chronicle* before the amalgamation), is developing on extremely interesting lines without losing its original appeal.

These are but pointers. There is no space for more, but they are perhaps enough to refute the lazy reader who blithely says, "All the papers are much of a muchness." Such myopia can expect no rewards.

In publishing, quite apart from houses that specialize in clearly defined types of books, many firms have a very definite policy.

One famous house insists that every novel published shall be equally acceptable reading to every member of the household. This policy robs it of some modern best-sellers. It also secures for it a vast and reputable public, the worth of which cannot be over-estimated. The

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some of the categories of offence that may cause the editor to regret—without the opportunity of explaining his reason.

These observations are more concerned with the feature and fiction side of writing, but their principles may be noted by all as indications of the workings of the editorial mind. Some contributors are still not convinced that it works at all.

Many contributions are rejected because they are what I might call ethically unsuitable.

In this sometimes rather pathetically fallible world there are doubtless occasional examples of surgeons being influenced by their private emotions or financial persuasion or by their state of health. Judges before now have no doubt been influenced by love or by the beauty of the prisoner; juries are no less fallible. Politics and religion are sometimes powerful in spheres from which they should be kept apart.

Such facts, however, are no justification in editorial eyes for glorifying moral offences or for showing how advantage can be gained from them.

Editors also have very rigid standards as re-

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gards the morality of the stories and articles they publish.

Nobody of any worth welcomes many of the modern novels and plays. Their transience and their worthlessness are apparent to all but the clamorous erotic minority to which they appeal. But, setting aside the mentally diseased, there is an increased frankness on many subjects since the War. This in many ways welcome development blinds some writers to the obviously definite views an editor must have upon moral questions as regards his accepted contributions.

It should be obvious that the editor of *Good Housekeeping*, for instance, is catering for a different public from that which reads a popular daily newspaper. The daily newspaper editor has a much greater responsibility than the publisher of magazines or books.

Granted that nowadays books of almost any type are accessible to anyone through the cheap libraries, they can never be so universally accessible as is the daily newspaper. The newspaper can be picked up anywhere at any time by anyone. It is left in conveyances, in restaurants, in the street. The smallest child can ask for it or

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find it without thought of interference or inquiry and without any personal risk. No library can ever quite approach this degree of accessibility, nor can a book in circulation be so much anyone's property as a newspaper.

It should be seen, therefore, that while I do not in any sense commend immorality in any form—or suggest that it is allowable so long as children cannot be brought into contact with it—there must be a difference in the outlook of various editors.

Let the writer realize first that no deliberately dirty writing endures, and never will.

Arnold Bennett, who was at least as outstanding a journalist as he was a novelist, says in *The Author's Craft*:

A sense of beauty and a passionate intensity of vision being taken for granted, the one other important attribute in the equipment of the novelist—the attribute which indeed by itself practically suffices, and whose absence renders futile all the rest—is fineness of mind. A great novelist must have great qualities of mind. His mind must be sympathetic, quickly responsive, courageous, honest, humorous, tender, just, merciful. He must be able to conceive the ideal without losing sight of the fact that it is a human world we live in.

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Let every writer absorb that sound advice, and, having absorbed it and satisfied his own and the editorial conscience, realize the necessity for taking thought not only upon the situations, but upon his view-point in revealing them. A vulgar mind can make a kiss repulsive; a fine mind can treat a morally disconcerting situation with decency and distinction and with instinctive feeling for the other qualities that inevitably surround it and account for it.

Much depends not only upon plot, but upon treatment.

As I have found that an anecdote is often more easily remembered than an argument, let me recall a story about W. S. Gilbert. When he was once asked if he was faithful to his wife he replied, "Madam, I am too good to be true."

That cryptic remark cuts both ways, and can be applied with usefulness to the question of editorial acceptances and rejections. It is not so much what you say as the way you say it.

Because the editorial view-point must differ in every case it follows that many admirable contributions will be rejected because they are submitted to the wrong markets. Many a

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short-sighted contributor, when his script is subsequently accepted, proceeds to gibe at the editors who had previously rejected it: The probability is that they knew their business better than he knows his own.

It should be clear that to achieve success not only theme but style must suit a particular market. Many a brilliant story plot or article idea has to be rejected because it has been treated from the wrong angle for the particular medium to which it was submitted.

It should be appreciated that a daily newspaper or a popular magazine is read possibly by royalty, certainly by peers, Society women, wealthy city men, artisans, and probably criminals—and sometimes by potential contributors. They may ask despairingly, "What have these various classes in common?"

My answer is, "Almost everything." When an editor gets letters of appreciation referring to the same contribution from a village grocer and an Oxford professor he can be sure that he is getting somewhere near a universal appeal.

Because, of course, the virtues and the vices are universal. The basic emotions and desires are

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every one's interest, although the particular expression of them may be governed by circumstance, temperament, and education.

Strip a dustman and an earl and stand fifty yards away, and you will probably not know which is which. Indeed, it is probable that the dustman will have the more attractive figure. I am quite ready to believe that it would be equally difficult to distinguish a princess and a "Nippy" in similar circumstances.

The process of their minds may be superficially different, but these differences are as nothing compared with the qualities they have in common.

They are both as likely to catch mumps as they are to be infatuated by the next man they meet.

Acceptance of the universality of interest implies that style must be suited not only to the market, but to the particular subject of the contribution.

It is no good writing up a "Sapper-ish" plot in the vein of a Dunsany fantasy. It is no use using A. E. Coppard's individuality if you do not possess his outstanding command of words

and felicity of phrase. It is useless to send a news item to a popular journal in language suited to *The Times*. If the news is there it will be extracted by the office staff, but that does not relieve the contributor of the charge of inefficiency.

There are certain reasons for rejection concerned with the editorial view-point which, I think, should be dealt with separately, not because they are of outstanding importance, but because they do not perhaps so readily occur to the outsider's mind as many of the causes I have just outlined.

Before I close this chapter, however, I should like to etch deep upon the minds of all readers the need for remembering the intense personal appeal a well-edited publication will have upon its readers. The good editor knows his public, and the good contributor accepts him as an expert and seeks to fill his specific needs. When this happens the public is not only won but held. How securely it is held is well known by editors.

It would not be imagined, for instance, that in these days of 14,000 new books a year and twopenny libraries making the best-sellers of

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every year available to the million I should be asked continually by readers where they can obtain in book form *Daily Mail* serials that were published before the War. Imagine, with the cascade of books and the millions of volumes available, being asked to sell, and even to reprint, stories that were published before I was able to read!

Yet this happens many times a year.

In a fascinating brochure recently published by *The Saturday Evening Post*—which belongs more to the world than to Philadelphia—it is recorded that the limits of the life of an issue of the magazine have never been tested.

Though it is now thirty-five years since the first of *The Letters of a Self-made Merchant* ran in the weekly, though more than a million copies of the book have been sold, readers still ask for the 1901-2 issues which contain them. In 1907 Albert J. Beveridge wrote three articles on the Bible as "Good Reading." Requests for them have never ceased. *One Way Out*, an anonymous article of 1910, never has been forgotten.

On one occasion *The Post* broke all precedent and sent galley proofs of the concluding part of a story to a reader who begged for this privilege



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as he was going where the magazine could not reach him. "I wouldn't give a damn if I did go to hell if I could have Bud Kelland and Norman Reilly Raine and Agatha Christie with me when I go."

That subscriber had his wish granted, for the recipient of the letter knew of the execution fixed for the next week at Charlestown Prison, Massachusetts.

Such things—reader interest, not executions—are among the precious rewards of editing. There is more joy over one such remembrance than in a thousand letters of pale praise or a million rejections.

No good editor enjoys rejecting. His life is difficult enough without it.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUBJECTS THAT ARE SUSPECT

'Anti' Themes—Hobby-horses that are not Favourites—Controversial Questions—Not in the Public's Interest—Name Problems—Don't capitalize Human Infirmary—Moderate your Language.

THE particular reasons for rejection to which I gave only passing reference in the last chapter are the special concern of feature and fiction writers.

There is a rational editorial objection to what I might call 'anti' themes.

Controversy is one of the essential ingredients of virile editing, but there are limits to this subject, and these limits are appreciated much better by editors than by contributors.

There are certain issues which are anathema to editors unless they are dealt with in a reasoned, high-minded, and dispassionate manner. I refer to such subjects as blood sports, birth-control, Roman Catholicism, performing animals, vivisection, etc.

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Now, discussions on all these subjects are, alas! capable of producing such hysteria in certain of their supporters and critics, and of doing so much harm, that many editors are compelled to avoid them. No one outside an editorial office can begin to imagine the blind, frenzied passion aroused among certain sections of the public when such topics are mentioned in print. Indeed, it becomes impossible to discuss them, except in publications that are catering for a thoughtful and reasoning public which does not lack conviction because it is prepared to admit that there are two sides to every question, and much right on each.

But, apart from this lamentable mass reaction, there is this to be said against the controversial contributor: all except detached observers are apt to become rabid when writing upon their pet subject. To read the contributions of many intelligent supporters or detractors of certain moral and social problems would lead one to believe that not only was God exclusively on their side, but also all human might, right, intelligence, and honour. So complete is their conviction, so flaming their sincerity, that the

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opposition is consumed in their passion and ceases to exist.

Do not, then, as an outside contributor, ride one of these hobby-horses and lash it with such fury as to inflict upon it even more cruelty than you can see with your infallible eyes in the opposition camp. Editors are not fond of blood-rousing hobby-horses. They know there is more circulation in the winner of the three-thirty—and certainly less cruelty.

In fiction the 'anti' class of rejection takes a slightly different form.

Many fiction editors reject stories that are anti-Christ, anti-Jews, anti-women, anti-religion, anti-any particular sect, anti-suburbia, and so on.

There are two good reasons why stories of this type are turned down. They are sure to be offensive to some readers—and there are countless themes acceptable to all types of minds and persuasions of thought—and they almost inevitably become, not stories, but propaganda pamphlets.

It is perfectly reasonable for a writer to create a character who is an anti-feminist, or to present a plot that depends for its success upon the

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idiosyncrasies of the suburbs, but that is a very different matter from utilizing a fictional form to exploit one's own feelings and views.

My own fiction policy—which, one gathers from printed contributions, is shared by a number of other editors—is that readers, while welcoming reasonable controversy and argument in the news and feature columns, expect, and are entitled to find, straightforward recreational reading in the fiction pages. I therefore avoid war, politics, stories taking advantage of the current political situation in any country, and stories concerned with religion in any controversial or sectarian form.

Although I have pursued this policy for some years there is no sign that the majority of my potential contributors have observed it, and some regular contributors need to be reminded of it continually. I cannot think of any other trade or profession where sellers pay less attention to revealed market requirements.

Many editors handling fiction also object to stories which, for want of a more concise description, I shall call stories against the public interest.

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This reason for the editor's regrets is perhaps best revealed by an example.

None of us needs convincing that the elementary virtues and vices are not confined to any class, and that the emotions are common to all.

It follows, then, that a man who, by reason of his job, has the lives of many people in his hands is just as likely to feel murderous as the man upon whom no one's physical safety depends.

One of the strange things about human nature is that we are much more critical of an engine-driver who sins and so wrecks his train than we are of a City magnate who by financial crime deprives hundreds of their livelihood and happiness. There might be infinitely more provocation to the engine-driver and much less background of comfort and happiness to encourage him in his duty.

Most editors would take, for instance, a murder-story whose drama was enacted in the cab of an express thundering on its way. For those who like thrills—and not fantastic ones at that—it is an admirable setting.

What I and many other editors would object to would be a murder story set upon a famous train, say the Flying Scotsman.

The emotions of the drivers and firemen of this famous train are no less deep, I hope, than those of the drivers and firemen of any other type of locomotive. There is the same chance of a drama being enacted in the cab of the Flying Scotsman as there is in the cab of an imaginary train in a fictitious country. But to print a story featuring this train would not only be grossly unfair to it and to the remarkable record of its *personnel*, but it would be unfair to the public.

It would be undermining the confidence of the people in a train that is somewhat of a public institution. Its owners and its drivers would be the last to pretend that it is infallible; but there is no other train quite like it, and its record is such that the public rely on it implicitly, and with reason.

Imagine the feelings of many who might read the story of a driver of the Flying Scotsman who quarrelled with his fireman and ultimately wrecked the train when they themselves had

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dear ones travelling on the train that very morning.

Some would say, "But why kotow to the squeamishness of a few imaginative folk who can't or won't understand that fiction is fiction?"

Poor reasoning this, for there is no kotowing. Surely sense is on the side of the editor, and the objectors to such a story would not be few, and they would not be unreasonably imaginative. Besides, what has the author gained that could weigh against the damage he would do?

The drama could be set in any train anywhere. There is not the slightest justification for incurring the dangers against which a good editor would guard, because they can be so easily avoided. If the story does not grip, or fails to achieve authenticity of atmosphere without the addition of a famous name, then surely the fault is in the author?

It is the needless introduction of persons or public places into stories that annoys. I suppose a person, taking thought, could commit murder or suicide from the Whispering Gallery of St Paul's Cathedral, but I should certainly reject



a story, however good it was, that utilized this specifically named setting and recorded details and circumstances that could be observed and re-enacted by the many visitors to the cathedral each day.

Put at no higher level of judgment, to publish such a story (which could be equally dramatic in a fictitious setting) would be pandering to the morbid mentality of people who will crowd round the scene of a crime—an attitude that surely cannot find support in the healthy-minded.

In a similar way it is unwise of a contributor to cast slurs upon specific professions or individuals. If the circumstances demand that the villain of a piece must be a Methodist minister, because only such a man would find himself in the circumstances or surroundings stated, well and good; but for an author to select a Methodist minister and have a cheap gibe at him because he happens to dislike one such minister is grossly unfair to a vast body of honourable men.

No editor wants his author's heroes, heroines, or villains to be characterless, vocationless, or

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without recognizable surroundings, but authors would be very well advised to avoid the rather petty satisfaction of working off their personal dislikes and prejudices in their fiction. Every editor will know what I mean, and contributors should learn.

These are small points, the reader may protest, points that can be eliminated with the blue pencil. True; but the successful contributor seeks to show the editor that he knows his job, and he knows that his work inevitably reveals the quality of his mind and thought.

No wise editor goes out of his way to encourage contributors with cheap and petty minds.

In the same category of comparatively small and easily remedied faults, which are, nevertheless, irritating and an indication of inefficiency, is the use of existing titles and the naming of branded products and recognizable places and institutions.

I do not mean that a narrative should be robbed of verisimilitude by the exclusion of all names. There is every good reason for utilizing Piccadilly, Portsmouth, or Kirkcaldy if these help the narrative. There is every good reason

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for naming a play, a book, an historical character, a make of car, if these things contribute to the atmosphere or the conviction of the story. What is less sensible, and, indeed, reprehensible, is to give your titled characters names that have long been honoured in Britain's aristocracy or have been before the public in very different connexions. There is no reason why your duke should not be the Duke of Portsmouth. He will seem just as real to the reader as the Duke of Norfolk or Lord Lonsdale, and the choice will be much more sensible.

The naming of specific products, places of entertainment, and resorts under their own name is deliberately utilized by some. It adds nothing to the worth of the story, and always lays the author open to the charge that he or she is being grossly unfair to other articles and resorts, and to the suspicion that he or she has an eye to ultimate favours from the places and products persistently mentioned.

An author has as much right as anyone else to his opinion upon the respective merits of rival products, entertainments, or places. He can quite fairly make his characters mention, say,

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the beauty of the Lake District or the depressing monotony of the East Coast fens. That is a very different thing from making his heroine go out of her way to praise Wright's Coal Tar Soap or Coty's lipstick, with the implied, if not direct, criticism of other makes.

When editors bar mention of branded products or specific places that cater for the public it is not in any sense that they are browbeaten by the power of the advertising columns. If it were so it would obviously be even better policy to eliminate mention of those products and places not using their columns and to encourage the naming of those who did advertise with them. The complications and impossibilities arising from such an absurd policy should be obvious even to the rejected.

The successful contributor will accept the editorial view-point, not grudgingly, but because he perceives and agrees with its common sense.

There is another class of subject and theme which, one would have thought, would have been transparently objectionable to the sensitive-minded. A long editorial experience suggests that its dangers are frequently not perceived

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even by those who, when their error is pointed out, are the first to dissociate themselves from thoughtlessness of intention to wound.

I refer to the class of story which capitalizes human infirmity. There are no doubt some very peculiar people in the ranks of the infirm and those physically incapacitated, and there is no sound reason why a hunchback or a one-eyed man should not be the hero or the villain of your story; but to capitalize any infirmity and to hold it up for ridicule, satire, or even mild fun is offensive to most editors and readers.

The same objection obtains when dealing with insanity in any form. The time has gone when the village idiot was the butt of every one's humour, and contributors would do well to remember that humour is poor indeed that has to depend upon so tragic a foundation. The dull-witted and the ingenuous are slightly different. Even the most accomplished story-teller would at times be lost without the inconsequent reactions of the dull-minded or scatter-brained.

Drunkenness is a ticklish subject. The word covers a vast sequence of conditions from acutely intelligent volubility to besottedness. The story

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that deliberately exalts inebriation will not find favour with any sound editor. The story that draws innocent fun from a mellow hilarity—which is generally far more human and far less damaging than the viciously negative virtues of some who condemn it—will invariably not offend. Much, of course, depends upon the treatment and the attitude of mind of the writer.

Certainly the story that tacitly commends drunkenness or suggests that it can be turned to advantage will be frowned upon by editors.

There is another mistake—small but important—that may be mentioned here, and the contributor who falls into this admittedly easily rectified error has not yet fully understood the editorial mind and the duties of an editor to his public.

I refer to the use of terms, however familiar, which are in effect terms of opprobrium when applied to other nationals. A well-edited publication will not stand for the use of the words 'nigger'—and certainly not 'nig'—'Chink,' 'Hun,' 'wop,' and 'Yank.'

There will be some cases where the editor is in difficulties with the verisimilitude of the story.

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No rule should be made that destroys the authenticity of conversation and puts into the mouth of crude speakers the phrases of a genteel drawing-room.

This danger, however, will scarcely ever present itself with regard to such words as I have indicated, but it will continually occur when dealing with common<sup>d</sup> expletives and swearing generally. The religious origin of the corrupt 'bloody' does not redeem it from the criticism that it is an extremely ugly and unpleasant word. The editor, however, cannot blind himself to the fact that with certain classes it is used regularly in their daily conversation.

There is no doubt that the use of asterisks or dashes for every expletive in settings that compel recognition of them is apt to be ludicrous. Acceptance of that fact does not necessarily imply that the offensive, though authentic, vocabulary should be printed in its entirety. The degree to which verisimilitude should go must be decided by the individual editor, but it should not be beyond the ability of both author and editor to reduce the occasions to the minimum without losing the sense of reality.

## CHAPTER VIII

# TOPICALITY AND ITS EXPLOITATION

Topicality—The Advantage of Staff Writers—'Red-hot Topical' and Seasonal Themes—Value of Anticipation—Original Treatment Essential.

THE question of topicality is one that cannot be ignored by any writer.

It is a subject upon which guidance may usefully be offered, because it is essential, if rejections are to be avoided, that the editorial attitude towards topicality should be understood. It frequently differs from the contributor's conception of what may be a useful asset.

As regards 'straight' news, it is obvious that speed must always be the essence of the contract. As regards feature-writing and fiction, topicality nowadays has a different interpretation.

It becomes more and more difficult for the outsider to contribute what is called in Fleet Street 'red-hot' topical material.

That does not mean that newspapers (which from their daily issue are the only media suitable



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for such material) nowadays neglect the value of such features. The reverse is, indeed, the fact. Nowadays articles will appear in the daily papers that were inspired by topics raised only the previous evening, and evening newspapers will devote feature articles to items that occurred in the same morning's news.

If we allow for the amazing speed of modern newspaper production, that fact does imply organization which generally enlists the staff on the spot. The staff writer is naturally preferred to the outsider, who may have to be sought out, and in any case, if he is an authority or an established free-lance, is probably busy with other activities that cannot always be set aside at short notice.

More and more does the modern daily newspaper's main feature page reveal office consultation and office-produced articles on topical themes.

There are, of course, frequent occasions when the emergence in the morning's news of a topic that is going to be talked about results in a hurried telephone-call to a tried and proved journalist who is an authority upon the particular

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subject. Such a man or woman will work at home or at the newspaper office, and can be counted upon to produce within a few hours copy written along the lines decided at the editorial conference earlier in the day.

The number of such writers is obviously limited, and they are invariably of such competence that they are unlikely to require the assistance of this book. It will be the aim of many beginners to obtain such prominence, but their apprenticeship, unless they have much leisure and a private income, will proceed along other lines.

Indeed, the average contributor will be soundly advised to pay attention to the category of contributions more fairly classed as seasonal than 'red-hot topical.'

Thousands of contributions are rejected every year because their writers do not appreciate the limitations of the circumstances and pit themselves hopelessly against journalists situated more advantageously.

There can be no doubt that the market for certain types of topical feature articles is narrowing for the average free-lance, but there is additional

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and increasing scope for seasonal features. The tendency is for newspapers to develop more and more upon magazine lines.

Their backbone will always be news, but with modern conditions of news-gathering and distribution and the news service of the radio it is inevitable that newspapers should do what the radio cannot do to the same extent—amplify and illuminate the main news of the day and develop topics that are seasonal and of wide appeal.

The newspaper of to-day and to-morrow will strive to make current affairs lucid and interesting, and will present to the world and his wife anything and everything that affect their lives. This function involves entertainment as well as education. It opens up vast possibilities for the free-lance which more than compensate for the present policy of many newspapers of devoting the whole of their leader page to one subject, generally treated by a 'name.'

I believe this phase will pass, because so often the subject selected is one that could more suitably be amplified and discussed in the leading news story which inspired it.

There will always be occasions when the news

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throws up a controversial issue which can well be discussed in a simultaneous feature article; but I doubt the wisdom of daily adherence to this policy, an adherence which must result in the rejection of much excellent material.

The older policy of giving three or four articles—or even more on occasion—upon the main feature page had the merit of ensuring that almost every reader found something thereon to interest him or her.

There are signs that a happy medium may shortly be achieved, and its acceptance will lessen the rejection of much admittedly excellent material.

Red-hot topicality is impossible in weekly periodicals and magazines—at least, in the same sense as it applies to newspapers. It is precluded by the conditions of production and distribution.

The periodical and magazine field is, however, paying more and more attention to seasonable topics. A number of magazines have died since the War—and many more deserve to die—because they had apparently no appreciation of the revolutionary changes that have been made in

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typography and presentation, and little apparent realization of the widening of public interests and the need for the inclusion of many entirely new subjects.

While newspapers of the future will encroach upon what used to be accepted as the magazine field, the flourishing magazines will, and must, accept the public interest in current affairs.

The periodical which is just a hotchpotch of competent material, but material, nevertheless, that could equally well have been printed five years before or afterwards, does not deserve to be a success.

All these observations stress the ever-increasing opportunities for seasonal and timely contributions from outsiders.

Editorial experience does not suggest that these facts are grasped, or at least applied intelligently, by the majority of writers.

The vital fault apparent in the submission of topical and seasonal material by outside contributors is that they cannot or will not appreciate the fact that newspaper and magazine topicality *anticipates*, rather than coincides with, the actual events.

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That remark perhaps needs a little explanation, and warrants it, because it would save many writers much work if they appreciated its implications.

Certain seasonal topics are obviously concerned with specific dates—Ash Wednesday, Quarter Day, the opening of Parliament, Armistice Day, Boxing Day, etc. The much wider field of topical themes is concerned with seasons or sustained events that are of infinitely more interest to the contributor because they are not dismissed in one issue of a newspaper or periodical. Such subjects will be apparent to any intelligent writer. They include such contrasting themes as seasonal sports or recreations, Wimbledon, Test Matches, spring, Lent, Christmas, holidays, harvest, circuses, pantomimes, seasonal fashions—an untold diversity of general topics that recur every year without, in most cases, specific notice in the printed calendar.

In the case of all these topics the newspaper and periodical interest is in the early days of their occurrence. Cruft's may draw an ever-increasing 'gate,' but it will be the day just before it opens and the opening day upon which news-

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paper and periodical editors will concentrate their interest on such aspects of the subject as are likely to be of benefit to the outside contributor.

Circuses and pantomimes may run for a month or two, but the days just before and the days just after their opening are the topical periods.

It is probable that if a writer submitted an article on circuses or pantomimes on January 15 he or she would be able to claim that these seasonal attractions were at the height of their drawing-power as revealed by box-office figures. Admittedly; but the editor's sense of topicality would be looking ahead to such later January and February topics as winter sports, the re-assembling of Parliament, the final rounds of the F.A. Cup, the spring publishing season, the burst of new plays due shortly to displace the pantomimes, etc.

It is the experience of most editors that topical manuscripts not only continue to arrive after the peak period of the subject has passed, but are submitted even after the event is over. I always receive a crop of 'Wimbledon' stories for at least a month after the finals are finished.

There are few things better calculated to dis-

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solve a contributor's credit with an editor than late 'topicality.' Even complete unseasonableness has more merits; indeed, sometimes it has advantages. I would not contemplate publishing a cricket story a couple of weeks after the last matches of the season had been played. In February, perhaps, when cricket was equally impossible, but conditions encouraged anticipation, I might find such a story a refreshing change from winter topics.

There is another sidelight on topicality that should not escape the observant contributor.

Many editors discard topical material without regrets for the sound reason that the public can have too much of a good thing.

This applies particularly to national events. A daily newspaper which will automatically devote many news columns to Christmas, Armistice Day, or a General Election, to cite very different examples, will ration the number of relative topical articles, because otherwise the paper becomes oppressively full of the one subject. Many admirable stories having a background of such topicality will be rejected to make room for material that offers a happy contrast.



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There will always be interest in various facets of national topics, but the day has gone when it was assumed to be good editing to have every article and story in a Christmas number occupied with trees, stockings, holly, and the like.

While any writer will be able to mark in from memory the red-letter days of his calendar of topicality, it should not be difficult for the alert free-lance to find a topical peg for every single day of the year. A dictionary of dates, the Prayer Book, a dictionary of biographies, together with a note of contemporary anniversaries, will give countless 'pegs' upon which to hang topical articles or stories.

Unfortunately editors regret the dullness of such machine-made articles, which generally have the dust of the *encyclopædia* about them, and in any case could be compiled in the office just as efficiently and with greater recognition of requirements.

The editor regrets that, while Mendelssohn's birthday or the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht *could* be the subject of most excellent features, the invariable treatment of them is so hackneyed and unimaginative

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that the contributions are rejected without a pang.

It should be obvious to the intelligent writer that if he or she selects a subject whose topicality is known or available to all, and draws upon equally accessible material, the article must reveal marked scholarship, cleverness of style, freshness of treatment, or originality in the angle of approach to merit attention.

## CHAPTER IX

### EDITORS—FICTION AND FACT

*Dispelling a Legend—Faults of Writing that cause Rejection—Conviction Essential to Success—Risks run by an Editor, and his 'Protective Rejections'—Women Writers' Faults.*

THE legendary picture of an editor—and who is more ready to imagine the impossible than the rejected contributor?—is that of a person commissioning contributions from famous and favourite writers, lunching in magnificent surroundings with notable novelists, dining with exotic women writers, lounging in luxury in pursuit of plots, and occasionally visiting the office to cause the rejection, unread, of every manuscript that does not bear a magic name.

That is the legend. How far it is from the truth the foregoing chapters will have indicated.

An editor, in addition to the reasons for rejection already discussed, does, however, have much what I might call essentially literary fault to find with submitted contributions.

By that I do not mean the failure of scripts to

reach the highest literary standards. In many markets an academic excellence is a handicap rather than an advantage.

It requires only a moment's reflection to see that the markets for academic excellence of literary style and subject are comparatively rare, and for the most part contributions for such are commissioned and often gratuitous.

The man and woman who can write about ordinary things freshly and refreshingly stands much more chance in journalism and novel-writing than the person who can discuss Chaucer's style or give the dates of the Venerable Bede.

In no sense must these remarks be taken as decrying or even minimizing the value of an excellent education and travel. They are made deliberately with the purpose of this specific book in view.

It may therefore assist some to understand why editors reject their literary efforts if I discuss briefly the most frequently revealed writing faults of free-lance contributors.

Misuse of words and bad grammar should be obvious errors, even to the writer. They are too

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frequently left for the editor's detection. They can, of course, be remedied if the script deserves it, but not unnaturally it seldom merits a second thought.

Prolix, involved sentences are disastrous, not only in themselves, but because they are the outcome of confused thinking, and that never makes for attractive fiction or for convincing facts.

Many stories and articles suffer from the interpolation of self, the author's comments and philosophies creeping in. He—or she—thinks them clever; the editor and the reader think they impede the narrative, and, believe me, these judges are invariably right.

It is the fashion, particularly among those young people who are so ill-equipped for writing as to lack a sense of humour, to scoff at modern journalistic style; but if writers could get their facts across as quickly and as concisely as does the modern reporter the lot of many an editor would be a happier one.

If you think this is journalistic prejudice test yourself with any news item of four or five paragraphs. and see whether you can rewrite

it in more concise form without sacrificing some of the information or inference in the original.

This exercise is perhaps best practised alone!

Excessive quotation and other methods of showing off, which are generally attempts to bluff the editor or hide the paucity of the material, seldom succeed.

Unsuitable style is a frequent cause of rejection; not the absence of literary graces or grammatical elegances, but a style quite out of keeping with the subject and the market concerned. A style that may be admirable for one subject may be absurd for another.

When, with the desire to be constructive, I often suggest a study of the writings of some of the classical prose masters my idea is met with suspicion. It is implied that a study of the canons of prose may be a handicap rather than an advantage.

I disagree entirely, although I have indicated earlier that it is the modern revealed requirements that must be studied and met. However, an architect who is planning ultra-modern flats does not completely ignore the age-old principles

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of architecture because he has no market for Norman or Gothic styles.

Perhaps, therefore, I shall best satisfy my desire to be constructive, and secure more attention, if I quote an extract from an article on "Plain English," by Miss Dorothy L. Sayers, in *Nash's Magazine*.

She at least can be called modern; and not only modern, but successful. Her popularity, like her scholarship, cannot be challenged. Her erudition is equal to her imagination.

After deploring some of the modern fashions in prose style—or lack of it—she quotes:

"Had God company enough of himself? Was he satisfied in the Three Persons? We see that he proceeded further; he came to a Creation. And as soon as he had made light (which was his first creature) he took pleasure in it; he said it was good; he was glad of it; glad of the sea, glad of the earth, glad of the sun, and moon, and stars, and he said of every one, It is good."

Miss Sayers continues:

Well, that was John Donne, who spoke with the tongue of angels, and we cannot expect Newspapermen Tom, Dick and Harry to speak like that. But they might at least try to speak like

men. Language that issues in a series of inarticulate bawlings betrays itself with a dreadful sureness: it is the speech of the weak-gutted, making defiant pretence of a vigour that does not exist. Language should and must change naturally with the years, but it ought not to be emasculated; if the change makes for power and precision, it is good; if for weakness and confusion, it is bad.

The test of good writing is a simple one. If a sentence puzzles or startles you, pull it to pieces. If it is good writing, then the harder you pull, the more tightly you will discover it to be woven together; and the more closely you examine it, the more meaning it will yield. But if it tumbles to bits easily—if you find its syntax dislocated, its epithets imprecise, its meaning vague or contradictory—then it is bad, and should be quickly thrown into the dust-bin of oblivion; one should not keep rubbish lying about in the house of the mind.

It is a strange fact that, while many subscribe to the belief that any fool can write, they are by no means certain that one has even to be a fool to write a short story.

There appears to be grudging admission that a book would, of course, take some time (no mention of talent!); but a short story—well . . .

Whereas, of course, the short story is one of



the highest forms of literary art, and frankly recognized as such by the masters.

Thousands of contributors are rejected in the fiction market because they have insufficient creative ability. Tens of thousands are rejected because, talent apart, they have not realized that short-story writing is an art, that a story must have form and balance and a flavour of its own. It may take one of a myriad forms, but it should never be formless.

In *Short Stories: How to Write Them* I endeavoured to give practical advice upon short-story construction in so far as it is possible to lay down rules for an essentially creative and elusive art. It is impossible now to examine this subject at length, but I would urge story-writers who experience continual rejection to look to the strength of their plots, the unity of the story's structure, the value of the opening and the ending, and the satisfaction, or lack of it, experienced by the reader at the end.

Let the author ask himself (as the editor, to be fair to the reader, must ask), "Is my title attractive, my opening arresting? Are my characters interesting, and are their activities worth

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a story, worth any busy person's time to follow? Are my facts fresh? Is my dialogue crisp, my psychology consistent? ”

If possible, seek the opinion of a brutally frank friend. When an author has lived with characters mentally for weeks he is apt to believe that all the colour and vitality that they possess in his mind is apparent in the script. Alas, it is seldom true.

Inaccuracies in themselves would not necessarily cause the rejection of a story, but they are bound to prejudice an editor and make him wonder whether facts that cannot so easily be checked are reliable. The trustworthy short-story writer does not know everything, any more than the editor does, but he should know where to find out.

Writers have the world to plunder—and the next world as well, if they care, though I advise readers to keep off psychic themes, particularly if they are hopeful of wide markets. They can create a new world, a new planet, a new man—there is, perhaps, no need to create a new woman—a death ray, a life ray, anything they like so long as they convince the reader at the time.

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And this reader, to save him undue discomfort, is represented by a fairly shrewd editor.

I mention this point because those who go beyond their own field of knowledge or reference, lay themselves open to increased risks. With the purely imaginative story or article my experience has been that, whereas the main idea often 'gets over,' small points that build up atmosphere and aid conviction fail, and the story loses all sense of plausibility.

Even when working in quite familiar fields writers frequently invite—and, believe me, secure—rejection because of inaccuracies on points that could so easily have been checked.

Alas, it is apparently human nature that when readers find an error they write in indignantly to the Editor-in-Chief. When they like a story or an article they tell their friends, but seldom tell the departmental editor responsible.

On the question of conviction in writing one point would appear to need amplification.

It has been my frequent experience that when I have rejected a story on the grounds that it was unconvincing the author has retorted gleefully that he or she was highly amused, because the

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main incident actually happened, or was based on a true anecdote in some historical biography.

Some appear to think that this defence entirely vindicates them and implies editorial inefficiency. Nothing of the kind. A fiction editor needs less conviction than most people that truth is stranger than fiction, but the function of the story-teller is to *convince the reader at the time*. Whether it happened in the author's experience, in history, or could happen, exactly to the last scientific detail, in the future is neither here nor there.

The reader does not enjoy the author's knowledge, and he is not interested in amplifications, justification, or vindication. He or she goes by the story exactly as it is written, and if in that form it fails to convince it is a bad story, even though the incident it describes may have happened a thousand times.

The same tests may be applied to article-writing. Failure to observe their demands causes many rejections.

The risks of editing that involves the employment of outside writers are so real that an editor is not unnaturally chary of using the work of

they may be, and graceful phrasing and apposite examples are no substitute for reasoned argument in an article.

The work of too many women is superficial. They can write; they get bright ideas (though their titles are often distinctly weak); but they give the suggestion of skating on the surface, of writing the article or story before it had been carefully thought out. It is not that women's manuscripts are more careless than those submitted by men, but that so often female contributors fail to get the best out of their ideas and subjects.

They are inclined to be less businesslike in the presentation of their manuscripts, certainly on the whole more erratic in spelling and punctuation, and apt to be disdainful of subjects that they know well. It is scarcely sensible to try to write about the Antarctic when you cannot write convincingly about your own kitchen.

There would be far fewer rejections if women would realize that what they deem ordinary subjects are the very subjects that compose the daily life of millions. The woman who can write informatively and brightly upon homely things

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an author whose previous article or story, when printed, revealed an error that could have been verified quite easily.

Editors have long memories, but although some may suffer from them it is not correct to assume that they work only in a negative direction. A reliable contributor is not forgotten by an editor, who, *curiously enough*, is much more interested in his acceptances than in his rejections.

The male reader may not take it amiss, or deem it necessary to skip these paragraphs, if I suggest, *only with the desire to be helpful*, some of the faults that are particularly noticeable in contributions by women.

In all types of writing many manuscripts by women give the impression that the writers are suffering from an inferiority complex as regards their work. There is no sex bar to-day in writing, and the chances for women writers have never been brighter.

Women are apt, both in articles and stories, to think that pretty generalities will pass for facts, and to be 'slight' in their subject matter.

Sketches are never stories, however charming

they may be, and graceful phrasing and apposite examples are no substitute for reasoned argument in an article.

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will receive far less rejection than the expert upon some interesting but remote subject.

When I suggest that editors would reject less frequently if the writers would be themselves the hint is not only for women; but it has been my experience that women particularly are apt to lose their personality in their writing.

A woman will come and discuss an article or a story with me and chat about it in bright, amusing conversation. In other words, she talks 'copy.' When she starts to write she suddenly takes herself seriously—affects a studied style that removes all animation and interest from her work. Her arguments may be the same, but, whereas when spoken they were entertaining, when written they are lifeless and flat.

Be yourself. If you are a woman don't ape masculine styles; imitations and echoes are never comparable with the real thing. Leave outstanding style to those to whom it comes naturally.

Sincerity, accuracy, and 'readability' should be the aims of all contributors. Nothing can take the place of personality and character, even in writing; the most distinguished style is no



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substitute, the most precise knowledge no recompense.

And remember that when Balzac called enthusiasm that "virtue within a virtue" he had been a writer for years. It is sound advice to-day. Enthusiasm not only overcomes rejection, but it animates and makes more welcome every word its possessor writes.

The bored need not turn to writing as a diversion, because the mentality that can be habitually bored with life is the last type of mind likely to be welcomed by others in a writer.

## CHAPTER X

### ASSESSING POPULAR APPEAL

Limits of Appeal—Technical Difficulties—Depression Unwanted—Pathological Themes Unsuitable for Popular Markets—The Invaluable Arts of Suggestion and Omission.

EVERY week thousands of scripts, excellent in themselves, are rejected because of the limits of their appeal.

Every one likes doing that which they do well, and every one is, not unnaturally, apt to think that because they find a subject or a setting intensely interesting their enthusiasm will be shared by others. Unfortunately, this is far from true.

The writer who is an expert on a subject of limited appeal is often surprised to find one acceptance followed by frequent rejection. He blames the fickleness of the editor, being quite confident that the quality has been sustained. On the question of quality he may be justified, but the editor, knowing that his public may be

## ASSESSING POPULAR APPEAL

interested occasionally in another's pet subject, is not ready to listen to it as frequently as the expert is prepared to talk about it.

The same criticism applies, in a sense, to popular subjects that in certain aspects have a very limited appeal.

For example, there could scarcely be named a more widely interesting topic than sport. Thousands of writers give enjoyment to millions by writing about games and sport. The expert on one phase of sport is in a position of advantage, but he has also to remember his particular difficulties. If he writes upon high diving he will, other things being equal, and unless he is very careful of his submissions, receive more frequent rejections than the writer whose subject is tennis or football. Not only that, but in the employment of his especial knowledge the expert must be particularly careful to be non-technical. Terms, rules, and situations that are common knowledge to him may require elucidation for others.

It cannot be doubted that the public interested in billiards, for example, is probably a hundred times as large as the public interested

in polo. Yet a writer could present a polo story or article that would have keen appeal to millions simply because, although almost all of the readers had not played polo or even witnessed it, they would know what it was like to chase a ball in front of the goal; they would be fond of horses, and they would know the thrill of a crowd and the drama of speed.

The writer on billiards could offer an equally well-written and informative story or article turning upon some technical point in the game and fail to find any general public market for it at all.

Almost in the same category are dialect stories, articles, and novels.

Editors dislike most of all those scripts that are written with only the faintest knowledge of the dialects concerned, and whose authors fondly imagine that a sprinkling of 'ye kens,' 'begorrahs,' or 'begging your pardons' produces verisimilitude.

Worse still, from the point of view of wide markets, are those scripts which, completely competent and authentic in themselves, are so full of dialect that to the non-native they

read almost as unfamiliarly as a foreign language.

In my capacity as an editor catering for millions I continually reject competent stories so full of dialect that the reader has to stop his reading to discover from the context the meaning of a local word or of a local idiom from the explanation in brackets alongside. It must be a brilliant story indeed that justifies such irritating procedure.

Wise editors have no hesitation in rejecting depressing articles and stories, particularly nowadays, when most people have more than their share of worries.

There is a difference, however, between depression and drama that involves death.

It is common knowledge that not only the masses but some of the finest minds in the land regard crime and adventure stories as their literature of escape, and, as such, distracting reading.

Appreciating that detached view, the reader can see that it is quite possible for a story to involve several murders and to be far from depressing. It is quite conceivable that an article

on executions might be interesting and not morbid reading; everything depends upon the mind of the person writing and his or her angle of approach.

What editors avoid like the plague are what I might call the pathological scripts. In an astounding prosperity boom the self-analysis of a suicide might be studied with interest, but in a period when no one is without anxieties it is anathema. It is the failing of the introspective and the young to imagine that there is no drama without depression, disease, or unrelieved, hopeless tragedy.

Do not imagine that I am implying that rejection can be avoided by the author's taking a blind Utopian view of the world and its ways. To suggest that sorrow, disaster, and tragedy do not exist is not only unnecessary, but silly.

To adopt a negative, destructive approach to life, however, is to invite rejections, and certainly to revel in depressing details is asking for trouble.

Editors of a national publication know that every week people beg them to read manuscripts

which are at sight not only quite unsuitable for them, but unpublishable anywhere.

The writers tell you that this is their last hope, and threaten to your face, and in letters, to end it all if you do not accept their manuscripts.

And though some such individuals are no doubt frauds, we know only too well that often their stories are all too true. It is one of the most heart-breaking jobs for an editor to convince unknown, desperate writers that he is not a bloodless devil. It is hard to receive, as I do frequently, letters saying that the bitter irony of my rejection is that the scripts described the author's own plight, and that my return of the manuscript has sapped their last ounce of resistance.

While an editor might stave off suicide or revive the spirit of one family by taking a script that was pitifully depressing in theme, he would be doing infinitely greater damage by printing it, quite apart from the unfairness to his employer. There would be thousands of his readers in little better state than that of the poor distracted author; many, without doubt, in

infinitely worse case. If he can give them a bright story, a distracting yarn, an article with some encouragement—an article which shows that some beauty, some kindness, some spirit, still exists—he will perhaps have done them a bit of good; certainly he will have done them no harm.

So I would say this to the writers who tend to dwell upon depression, particularly from a hopeless, negative angle, and especially to those who delight in medical details: the greatest literary artists of the world, the most successful contemporary journalists, have not been those who have been ignorant of suffering or blind to its incidence, but they have definitely not been those who have presented hopeless, unmitigated depression.

The truth is, of course, that the lives of so many are strangely uneventful—less eventful, even to-day, than we imagine. I was talking recently to a man of thirty-five, quite a 'man of the world.' He said he was just going to his first funeral. The other member of our trio, a Londoner who had travelled, and was far more knowledgeable than most free-lance writers, said



that he was in his fortieth year and he had never seen a dead body.

These two incidents, trivial in themselves, struck me forcibly, and are indicative. When, therefore, those who lead even, undramatic lives experience an acute illness in their family circle or witness some accident or disaster they are apt to seize upon such as dramatic material that must not be missed.

Those who have stood by in the vigil of pneumonia or seen a beloved friend suddenly stricken with the scourge of tuberculosis recognize these crises as high drama in their lives, and every detail is etched deeply upon their minds.

That in itself, however, is no justification for thinking that the details are good copy for general consumption.

The art of writing includes the facility for intelligent omission.

It is natural that such crises and comparable physical, spiritual, and emotional disturbances should have place in an author's stock-in-trade. Nothing can ever be quite so vivid to us as that which we experience personally. Only the very competent author can project himself into the

minds and emotions of his readers to secure the conviction produced by his personal experiences.

But it is possible to extract the full drama of a car crash without describing the gouged eye or the brains spattered on the windscreen. It is possible to depict the tension of an operation without revelling in every bloody detail. It is possible to describe the physical and emotional anguish of tuberculosis without going into minute details of hæmorrhages which will wring the heart of every one of the thousands of readers who have witnessed similar agonies.

If you cannot do these things you will be rejected, and the fault will lie not in the editor, but in you.

Realism in itself is no guarantee of art or literary excellence. It is, alas! too often a perversion of sadistic, vicious, and unhealthy excess in its authors.

I should be at fault if I ended this chapter upon a destructive, depressing note, so I would remind all writers of Sir Philip Sidney's words: Give me "a tale which holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney-corner."

## ASSESSING POPULAR APPEAL

I would echo and amplify them, and would say to authors of articles, stories, and novels—indeed, to all those who desire to remember why editors regret:

Give me a script that thrills, fascinates, and informs without appearing to educate.

Give me sentiment devoid of sentimentality and sloppiness.

Give me a foreign setting that breathes fresh air and healthy energy and a natural lustiness.

Give me a scientific theme that sets thousands of mechanical minds working—and stops Father twiddling the knobs after supper.

Give me a business or industrial subject or setting with which tens of thousands can identify themselves.

Give me a script with some encouragement in it, some fine endurance, some achievement against odds, some secret heroism.

Give me a story or an article that grips the mind, distracts the weary eye, and takes even tired men and women out of themselves for a quarter of an hour.

If you can produce these things you will quickly discover for yourself not only why

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editors regret; but why they accept, and why too they rub their hands with glee when they find a contributor who can give them exactly what they want—when they want it.

## CHAPTER XI

### FAULTS OF INEXPERIENCE

*The Faults of Inexperience—Dangers of Aiming too High—Merits of Gradual Progression—Inadequate Technique—News Suggestions and their Dangers—'Woman Interest'—Importance of the Pictorial Angle.*

WHILE editors are invariably prepared to go out of their way to encourage talent, it is inevitable that pressure of work prevents their communicating with all those whose writing shows promise, but is as yet far too immature for their particular purpose.

It is probable that the West End theatrical manager may have his attention drawn frequently to talent that, while useless to him, might well repay the attention and encouragement of a provincial amusement caterer if developed along the right lines.

These faults of inexperience are naturally seldom realized by the authors, though they are the cause of continual rejection. I propose to indicate the most common.

## FAULTS OF INEXPERIENCE

Every opinion of his upon tomatoes may be authoritative, and yet when he tackles an article upon the commercial future of the industry throughout the world it fails transparently.

Its rejection may be due to one of the many faults outlined in previous chapters, but very probably it will be the result of immature handling and inadequate literary technique.

A woman fiction-writer may know intimately a country so little exploited and so potentially interesting as, say, Finland. She may know from personal experience every side of the people's lives, may have shared their emotions. She has, in fact, ample material and experience for writing a 'Forsyte Saga' of the Finns. But if she is wise and wishes to escape undue rejection she will do nothing of the sort—not at first. She will confine herself to a few characters until she is satisfied that her creative ability and her command of the craft justify expansion.

And such discipline is not the restriction that it appears to the ardent beginner. It is by no means necessary to utilize thousands of people or to occupy acres of territory in fiction to present a national emotion. The feelings of a

million can be presented through the heart and mind of one—given the efficient craftsman.

The wise beginner, like the wise producer, tries to crystallize his thoughts and emotions and to present them in small compass. He leaves the sagas, the world topics, the international political surveys, to the experts in knowledge and in writing.

Let confidence and competence advance together, and at no stage must the beginner forget that quite small facets of a subject are of considerable interest to a less well-informed public.

Writers with full command of their craft are just as likely to be rejected because their articles or stories are too crowded as because they are too slight. Many an article, sound in fact and treatment, is too comprehensive in its scope for its length; many a short story is so packed that it reads like a potted novel.

## FAULTS OF INEXPERIENCE

Beginners, not unnaturally, bring a certain freshness to their work; but often their ideas are not fully exploited. Editors frequently return good ideas that have been badly handled, and often take less original ideas that have the advantage of novel, arresting treatment.

So many, as soon as an idea occurs to them, start to write instead of working upon the idea to ensure its fullest exploitation.

A writer discovers in some remote church the font from which a Prime Minister was baptized. This excites him, and he writes an article upon the font with the aid of the verger and the local guide-book.

There is no real rhyme or reason why an article should appear upon that singular font any more than one upon "Corn in Egypt," "The Cuckoo's Courtship," or "The Prevalence of Toothache among the Natives of Malaya."

The expert would probably note the idea, find at his leisure information—and photographs—of various fonts which had been used for the baptisms of several outstanding Premiers, and then, *when Prime Ministers were in the news,*



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Some beginners, inclined to play for safety, choose themes and settings that are already sadly over-written. It is obvious that if the setting is hackneyed the editor will expect compensation in the form of distinctly novel treatment or outstanding style.

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produce an excellent article upon the baptisms and religious associations of outstanding political men.

The beginner who gleans the seed of a short-story idea from some happening witnessed or overheard, or from some item read, immediately proceeds to write it in the setting in which it occurred. Every fiction editor knows that when a what I might call ready-made story idea appears in a news item he will receive the exact incident, in fiction form, a dozen times within the following week.

An example of the ready-made story idea occurred in the Press while I was writing this chapter.

The news item came from a French town. For three years a woman had flooded the place with anonymous letters. All and sundry, known and unknown, were sufferers. The priest who taught the woman's son came in for persistent abuse from the unknown poison pen because the child had not been given high grades in the catechism class.

After a period of intense unpleasantness the suspicions of the community began gradually

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to gather round this woman, and eventually to centre upon her.

Frightened, the woman decided that the best way to disarm suspicion was to continue sending the letters. The malicious accusations therefore continued unabated, and still it was impossible to pin any of them on her.

Then, in an excess of zeal and fear, she planned her master-stroke. It would silence suspicion for ever. She posted herself one of the efforts of her poison pen, and hastened to the investigating magistrate in vindication of her innocence.

He gently drew the distraught woman's attention to the fact that the letter had not been opened!

I expect to receive that story for the next five years.

Such stories return quickly, and the authors wonder why.

The more experienced writer would be grateful for that potential plot, and would proceed to select for its presentation as dramatic or as charming a setting as its structure permitted and his experience allowed. He would then choose

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characters who could exploit the idea to the full, and find a method of approach that would ensure the maximum of surprise or drama or emotion offered by the original idea.

The basic plots presented by the amateur and the expert might be identical; the handling of them would mean all the difference between acceptance and rejection.

In previous chapters I have spoken of the phenomenal extension of woman's interests, and of woman's participation nowadays in almost every activity. It behoves an editor, therefore, to keep an eye on 'woman interest.' Reflection will prove that there are scarcely any publications devoted to and exclusively read by men. It follows that all editors must realize the feminine interest in their pages and see that it is encouraged and satisfied.

This fact has not dawned upon many writers. Acceptance of it by no means implies a pandering to feminine fads and foibles. It would be untrue to suggest that women are interested only in women's topics, but there is much difference between pandering artificially to women readers and writing as though they did not exist. That

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difference also frequently means the difference between acceptance and rejection.

The inexperienced show a similar lack of appreciation of the pictorial angle.

It is absurd to suggest that a story or an article will be rejected solely because a suitable illustration does not present itself to the editor. It is true to say, however, that editors, particularly of periodicals, have to pay considerable attention to the illustrative possibilities of all material they purchase. Indeed, I know a number of highly successful free-lances who often submit a feature idea to an editor with a suggestion as to a novel lay-out, and never write an article at all without visualizing it in terms of eventual presentation. Even if the contributor's ideas are not passed on to the editor, this habit will go far to assist in understanding the editorial outlook.

The expert will often say to himself, "No, that doesn't sound like So-and-so," or, "I can't see that in . . ."

A few moments of reflection upon these lines will often save rejections, for the presentation was never more important than it is to-day, and



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a contributor who can think pictorially and in terms of novel and attractive lay-out will not lack editorial encouragement—provided always that the material is good.

Other things being equal, a play with a change of scene is more distracting than one in which a set is constant throughout. The same applies to stories. This point is really an extension of the principle of visualizing the eventual presentation of one's material.

It should not be imagined that editors will welcome patronizing make-up suggestions from contributors who have yet to achieve acceptance. My aim is to direct the minds of contributors along productive lines. The average contributor is inclined to think of his or her contribution in terms of script. The script is the start and not the finish of the editor's thoughts upon the subject, and *anything that can aid him or anything in the script that reveals a perception of editorial difficulties* will be remembered to the contributor's credit.

The receipt of a rejection is a time of dejection. I do not speak without knowledge: many a time a dozen of my homing pigeons have

## FAULTS OF INEXPERIENCE

thudded on the mat by the same post. Nevertheless, it should be a moment of inquiry, not of desolation. No manuscript should be rejected without the author's giving a moment's thought to the reason for its return.

If none of the former chapters has given a hint concerning rejection, perhaps the reason will be found in the next chapter. It deals with a fault as frequent as it is insidious. It is, alas! a fault which writers are particularly slow in detecting in their own work, but which never fails to be discerned by the alert editorial eye.

## CHAPTER XII

### FRESHNESS AND ORIGINALITY ESSENTIAL

The Disadvantages of Ordinarieness—Nothing Wrong, but so Little Right—Too much Revision may kill Originality—Beginners and Topical and Seasonal Opportunities—A Fresh Angle Essential.

Few women will admit to themselves that they are ordinary or plain, and the same reticence is naturally found in contributors of both sexes with regard to their writing.

Yet thousands of contributions are rejected every week for the simple but quite sufficient reason that they are ordinary.

In some cases the fault cannot be altered, because the scripts are the products of uninteresting, unoriginal minds. Without claiming any especial merit for the type of mind that makes for successful writing, I think it should be admitted that the person who, though admirable in character, has no sparkle, no wit, no humour, no animation in letter-writing or conversation, no stimulation for others, should hesitate before

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taking up authorship. He or she may be an admirable person, but the essence of almost all writing is, in the long run, entertainment and distraction, and an individual without any entertaining and distracting characteristics can scarcely hope to acquire them in writing.

There are admittedly some who 'find' themselves' in writing, who, lacking the facility for flashing wit and swift retort, are nevertheless delightfully humorous in prose. But such people are never uninteresting in mind, though it may require an effort to draw them out. There are others, magnificent in company, who cannot 'put themselves across' in print.

Whatever the variations on the theme, it is every one's experience that they meet in life quite estimable people who leave no impression upon them; who are devoid of colour and imagination and personality; whose vices and virtues are indistinguishably blended in a harmless mixture; whose words and whose thoughts are adequate for all occasions, but leave no mark, no memory, no desire for more.

Editors meet such people in life, and they meet many more of them in print.

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I have edited literary pages, fiction pages, trade journals, magazines, and in all the chairs I have been forced continually to say of manuscripts, "There's nothing wrong with this, but I've no desire to take it. We could print it at a pinch quite safely; but there's nothing outstanding, nothing even noticeable about it."

The manuscript is ordinary, dreadfully ordinary. And back it goes.

The author, no doubt, examines his facts. They are sound. His arguments are logical and progressive, his characters adequate, and his psychology is convincing. His atmosphere is authentic—that he does know. His dialogue is plausible, his plot watertight, and his title—well, at any rate, it's adequate.

And the editor would be the first to admit all these worthy but insufficient ingredients.

There is nothing wrong with the script. If there were there might, in a sense, be more hope. A faulty script with some imagination and vigour is more likely to be the forerunner of acceptances than a dead-level, ordinary script so workmanlike that you can visualize the whole structure from the first page; so machine-made

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that you can almost hear the mechanism creaking; so laboured that the author's sweat has blinded the type; so obvious in style that you can complete each sentence mentally after reading the first phrase; so worthy that you long for the relief of original sin. Writers of such scripts, for their own safety, are best warned off the course right away.

There are others who are ordinary simply through lack of hard work. If you think that the expert writers achieve their bright thoughts, their crisp sentences, their wit and humour, and their general lively intelligence with no more effort than it takes you to write the flat and obvious you are sadly ingenuous.

That which appears the most spontaneous is invariably the result of the hardest labour. Nothing could be more spontaneous than Wodehouse dialogue, yet the author even now spends hours achieving that beguiling readability of a few paragraphs.

True, facility is increased with practice. The writing mind can be compared with the human voice in that respect. Elasticity, flexibility, and an increased range can be achieved by anyone

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who will give the requisite hours to practice; but that does not by any means imply that mere routine writing will give the technique of the accomplished performer.

It will sound absurd to the earnest beginner, but frequently ordinariness is the result of *trying too hard*, thus taking all the life out of the script.

The ignoble army of ordinaries is so vast that perhaps it may be helpful to offer some suggestions. This trap catches even the competent at times.

The first examination should be of the plot or subject. No subject is obvious if its treatment is original.

For instance, newspapers, weeklies, and even monthlies (though they go to press weeks ahead) are interested in seasonal topics. Armistice Day, Christmas, the cricket season, are instances of the many fixed features or seasons that have some bearing upon editorial requirements. There are many smaller anniversaries, such as the 12th of August, St Valentine's Day, harvest, Wakes' weeks, Burns' Night, and so on that are annually recognized in the daily, weekly, and often in the monthly Press. They are, in fact,

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seasonal topics that can scarcely pass unnoticed, though nowadays, particularly in the newspapers (which must always be one of the largest potential markets for the free-lance), there is more and more disinclination to give extensive feature space to seasons or events that are automatically receiving continual and considerable mention in the news columns.

Not many years ago it appeared to be the principle at Christmas, for instance, when news columns and picture pages were full of Christmasy news, that every other feature should have a Christmasy flavour, and even that the fiction should be concerned with carol parties, indigestion, or the inevitable Scrooge.

That principle, I think, was wrong. The result was a consistent flavour of the season, a similarity of all illustrations, and a complete lack of variety and contrast, vital points in any well-edited publication.

Of course, there will always be room for seasonal articles and fiction, but the hackneyed approach to the subject stands less and less chance of acceptance.

The ordinary person (generally a fortnight or



a month too late) decides that Christmas is approaching, and that he or she will write an article on "How Carols Originated," "Christmas Superstitions," or "When I Spent Christmas in the Tropics"—all of which subjects are probably written about a thousand times every December, and as invariably rejected.

If it is not an infallible rule that second thoughts are best in writing it is certainly true that first thoughts should be examined ruthlessly. Fourth and fifth thoughts, if they are encouraged intelligently, are likely to show improvement, not deterioration.

The writer should jot down several of the obvious, ordinary aspects of the subject, and then ask himself what would interest him about them. Whatever is written will be stale to some one, but you can reduce the risk.

I, for instance, have read thousands of articles upon the origins of carols, the meaning of holly and mistletoe, the ritual of Christmas food. I should be interested to know—as an individual, not as an editor—how many countries contributed to the feast of food and fruit and drinks that are the inevitable Christmas board, how

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many months previously the growers and shippers contributed to your Christmas dinner, why certain ingredients are inevitable, and how they came to be inseparable from the feast.

I should be interested in an intelligent and bright article on the origin of the Christmas crib or an article describing the counterpart of Christmas in the religious year of the other great faiths. How, for instance, is the birth of Buddha celebrated? When? And with comparable feasting—or with fasting?

You may know all these things. I don't; and I venture to think that the public would be more interested in their presentation than in the ordinary and obvious "Christmas Superstitions."

As a fiction editor I reject hundreds of ordinary Christmas stories every year, yet when a contributor conceived the idea of presenting the story of the three Wise Men in a modern setting I was immediately interested. He made them commercial kings—film magnates to whom money was no object, but box-office everything. They were searching, unknown to one another, for a film star who had slipped out of their

clutches before they had realized her enormous potentialities. A star was shining unseen, and each wanted to add her to his constellation.

She was living quietly somewhere in England, they discovered.

They would tempt her with incredible offers now that they knew what a marvellous earner she might be. Secret emissaries were sent from Hollywood with open cheques. As they gradually converged upon her innocent and hitherto secret sanctuary they discovered one another, and after a heated argument a conference agreed that one delegate should approach the woman and at least bring her to a favourable state of mind before they bombarded her with their competitive offers.

That man approached the woman. Unknown to her, he observed her with her child, and he read in her eyes, in her very bearing, a happiness and tranquillity that all their money and magnificence could not buy. He realized that they had sought in vain, that they were powerless, and the others, when they had seen likewise,

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had come confident that the open cheques in their pockets could not fail to buy this woman's talents once she was discovered, were dumb-founded before the revelation of love. They brought presents to the helpless child who had defeated them, and returned whence they had come.

A fresh angle this, which secured its reward.

But once you have satisfied yourself that your plot or subject-matter is not ordinary all is not necessarily well with you. The angle of approach can be so ordinary that it negates any originality contained in the basic idea.

In the case of articles the question of an original approach is often impersonal, a matter of 'slant' and the arrangement of your facts and arguments so that they attract from the outset and hold the reader's attention throughout.

With fiction approach and arrangement are complicated by the question of selecting the narrator. The ordinary story is invariably seen through the eyes of the obvious party, or told by a detached outsider who reduces the value of the story to a flat, impersonal level.

The person first thought of should be care-

fully examined before his claims are admitted. The detached observer and the past-tense story have merits, and there are some editors who are averse to the first-person narrative; but many scripts, particularly short short stories, could be made much more saleable by seeing them through the eyes of a subordinate character.

Why give the stage drama always to a person in the audience when the conductor has a privileged view, and is poised between audience and actors with a duty to each? Why always relate the crime story through the eye of the criminal? A much more exciting 'slant' might be obtained by describing it through the eyes of a watching housekeeper upstairs who was at first too paralysed with fear to do anything.

Ask a trained reporter who is sent to the scene of a crime whose testimony he would prefer—that of the passer-by with no interest but as an observer, or that of a member of the staff with equal facility for observation and similar emotions and physical fears.

Detached observation may be valuable in law, but in fiction it is apt to be so detached that it is dull.

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Then the writer who fears ordinariness should look to the actual writing. *Clichés* can be defended in that they automatically express in brief form something that every one immediately understands. The sickening thud, the sacred edifice, the school-marm—all immediately flash a picture through our minds. But we are not reading fiction to have familiar pictures flashed obviously before us; we want to be distracted, educated without knowing it, amused.

The wise writer weighs the dialogue, the adjectives, the actual construction of the sentences, and the paragraphing—all small things in themselves, but each contributing its quota to the sum of ordinariness or distinction.

Dialogue is the most difficult of all, though to many it appeals quite easy. It is particularly deceptive because good dialogue reads completely naturally and spontaneously. It has not by any means come naturally to the author.

A moment's careful examination of a general conversation will reveal that more than half the dialogue is completely irrelevant, and that even the good talker spends twice as many words in

describing a person or scene as the author can afford to give in a narrative. The art lies in selection—the choosing of the vital phrases and comments, and the use of them so that they do not appear stilted and unnatural.

Many first-rank writers, to my knowledge, keep a conversation book, and jot down from time to time singularly apt phrases or comments that have the merit of animation, conciseness, wit, or complete appositeness.

This does not mean that the remarks are all recorded for use in the same context, or that jottings should be confined to uncomfortable comment or crisp criticism. Every one has among their friends some who have the knack of producing the happy adjective, of describing something they have seen in an original phrase that conveys more than a whole paragraph of laboured though authentic, description. Some may continually produce quaint phrases; others use comments that are essentially sophisticated or essentially countrified. These things could be noted with gratefulness and used, not so that one's friends can recognize their conversation in your fiction, but for the enrichment of your

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vocabulary, the development of your writing mind, and the stimulation of your imagination.

The adage "Adopt, adapt, improve" need not be overlooked in writing. No one is completely original. Plagiarism and the transparent exploitation of one's friends are two of the most despicable crimes in authorship, but the recognition of originality in character and the ability to absorb 'copy' from life are in a very different category.

Without these gifts the most enthusiastic writer will be not only ordinary and rejected, but sterile after a few years.



## CHAPTER XIII.

### WHY FIRST NOVELS ARE REJECTED

Arnold Bennett's Description of a Novelist—A Backward Glance—Good Writing not Enough—The Creative Urge—Prestige Value of Books—Beginners' Faults—Anticipating Fashions in Reading—Vital Need for Story-telling.

ARNOLD BENNET, sound journalist as well as able novelist, says in *The Author's Craft*:

The novelist is he who, having seen life, and being so excited by it that he absolutely must transmit the vision to others, chooses narrative fiction as the liveliest vehicle for his feelings. He is like other artists—he cannot remain silent; he cannot keep himself to himself—he is bursting with the news.

I cannot imagine a better text for any comment upon novels that is likely to be of assistance to beginners.

It is helpful in viewing the present situation in its proper perspective to look back occasionally.

Less than a hundred and fifty years ago Edmund Burke estimated the reading public in

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this country at 80,000. It was, indeed, as early as this that the circulating libraries started, handling often, in the case of fiction, the three-volume novel, which, fantastically bulky and unbusinesslike compared with modern standards, had patent advantages over its seven-volume rival. The arrival of the perhaps weekly box of books from London to the outer circulating centre was an event.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and with the establishment of copyright and authors' agreement, fiction has increased its hold until it has reached the amazing manifestations of to-day.

It seems impossible to believe nowadays, with educational authorities sending motor libraries to the most remote hamlet, with twopenny libraries at every corner and a bewildering mass of periodicals on each bookstall, that not so many years ago people queued up for the publication of Dickens in part form, and readers in their hundreds, including titled people who presumably were in the literate and library-subscribing class, would write to newspapers begging advance proofs of the instalments of an exciting serial.

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Those days will never return. The trend of fashion in reading changes, though certain recurring cycles are distinguishable. The most significant point, apart from the varying presentation of certain types of reading appeal, is the entry and rapid rise of the detective novel.

With some knowledge, then, of the past (which might with advantage be amplified by anyone entering seriously into novel-writing), the beginner intends to add his or her venture to the mass. And remember that for every novel published probably thirty or forty are rejected.

Even so, never has the spate of novels been greater than it is to-day. New novels published in this country alone amount to thousands each year, and there are periods at the peak of the spring and autumn season when a hundred or more novels are published in one week. And these are new novels. Reprints and new editions give an additional figure.

It might be imagined; therefore, that in some ways the chances of the unknown novelist had never been more promising, and in a sense that is correct. The cry of many is that the numbers should be reduced, that the standard of those

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*published should be raised, and the fewer novels thus left given a better chance.*

Now, while many publishers may be agreed that too many novels are published, the remedy is not so easy as it might appear. Publishers—with few exceptions, and these need not concern the beginner in writing—are not philanthropists. They do not contribute to this spate of novels for fun. Each book they add to the pool has, or at least they think it has, some chance of paying its way. Otherwise why publish it?

It is agreed that the general level of fiction published has never been higher than it is to-day, and it would seem equally apparent that the period lacks giants. This phenomenon, in many ways to be deplored, is noticeable in other arts.

This concerns the beginner to some extent, because even the widest mass public, which at present reads without thought, will gradually acquire discrimination in its reading. Much that is published to-day is atrociously written, but its proportion will inevitably decline.

The beginner with designs upon the novel field need not be capable of writing literature. Since

the advent of the twopenny library the largest-selling novels are often by authors comparatively unknown to the discriminating book-lover. And they need not be scorned because of that. Writing will be pitiful indeed when it has no room for undisguised, easily assimilated entertainment. But, plot and setting apart, competent, if not distinguished, writing will be more and more looked for in the novels of the future.

Horse-racing and the stage are not superior to publishing when it comes to a gamble, and the success or failure of many books surprises none more than the publisher. There are, however, still some rules which publishers apply, some deductions—that affect rejections—to be drawn from experience. From my own knowledge of publishing and from frequent contact with publishers of every type of book I make these comments to beginners in novel-writing, with the suggestion that a consideration of the preceding paragraphs has been useful in achieving the right perspective.

There is an indescribable lure about the novel. Few people write for any length of time without attempting a novel. Some, indeed, with

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complete abandon, start upon a novel before they have proved to anyone beyond themselves that they can write acceptably.

And in connexion with novels that word 'write' requires amplification. The implications of the word may be satisfied by the ability to produce grammatical sentences and a tolerably fluent style. I know a number of journalists who, with these qualifications, make a comfortable living and experience few rejections. In a sense they are like amateur dressmakers working from a pattern. They have a certain news sense, they know the form in which articles are acceptable to particular markets, and they manufacture the product as required and as often as they can. Let there be no criticism of them for that. They may be honest and able journalists, good at their job, conscientious and reliable.

But while, in actual practice, there is no dividing-line between the journalist and the creative writer, when the extremes are compared the qualifications are, in fact, vitally different.

There are many journalists who are little more than compilers, others who hover on the borders of creative work, and others whose work is

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essentially original and satisfies the most exacting tests that could be applied to a novelist. Indeed, many prominent journalists have become leading novelists, and the journalistic services of many novelists are eagerly sought by editors. But the novelist requires something beyond a journalist's equipment.

*He or she must have something to say.*

It has been suggested that all first novels should be destroyed, and, indeed, some firms refuse to publish them. It is equally true, if not always admitted, that many of the so-called 'first' novels published are not first novels at all. They may be the first to appear, but they are not the first the author has written. This implies no deception upon the part of the publisher, but common sense on the part of the author.

The first novel written is very frequently the outpouring of adolescence, and in any case is most unlikely to be saleable.

Let me beg those who are planning a first novel, or who have one in some secret drawer, to think twice, not only before they burden an already overwhelmed market, but, more important still, before they run the risk of a

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grave psychological setback through constant rejection.

Let them ask themselves if they wrote it because they had an unquenchable, imperious desire to write or because it flattered them to tackle a big theme—"and there is such a lot of rubbish on the market. I could do better than that myself!"

Henry Williamson, describing the travail of *Tarka the Otter*, has confessed:

I found it difficult to pay the rent of the cottage in those days, and when my wife fell ill and had to stay in bed for nearly three months I did the cooking and the housework and washed the baby's napkins and found time to begin my writing only about ten at night, writing *Tarka* in the kitchen while the baby cried in the crook of my left arm. . . .

The baby cried and cried, and I got so tired of cooking that in the end we ate bread-and-butter and lettuces for every meal, and daily I wrote between five and six thousand words of *Tarka*, usually after midnight when the baby fell asleep and did not need walking about with. Yet I enjoyed it all; I knew the prose was straight, keen, and true. Facts, you know—it's all here in Devon if you just happen to see, hear, or smell it.



If you had an urge like that, even if you had not equal ability, there is a chance of your having written a worth-while novel—particularly if you had anything to say.

That does not imply controversy, propaganda, singular erudition, or an outstanding philosophy of life. It does require that you shall have something more than the trite mind, the obvious view-point, stock characters, easily anticipated, 'transparent' story development, and hackneyed settings.

Thousands of novels are rejected because they are ordinary. Yet their writers are *correct* in essaying the novel form if there is a chance of their acceptance. It is the fact that there is more prestige value to be obtained in the writing world from a novel than from dozens of articles and stories. And this book, after all, is written primarily for those interested in writing as a profession or as a remunerative hobby.

Many a novel, well received and worth reading, does not make more than £50 for its author. It may have taken many months to write, and in a comparable period most writers would be able to earn more in actual money by means of

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articles, short fiction, or news. Even so, they will be well advised to tackle a novel.

There is an undeniable satisfaction in writing a novel which, in my experience, is not to be found in any other form of writing.

As this book is written as a practical guide to those in the early stages of their craft I may be in danger at times of appearing to place the accent on the financial yield. In a book of this nature I think that is inevitable, but it far from represents my own outlook or the outlook of any sane person who would derive not only a living but a sense of personal satisfaction and achievement from living by the pen.

In the novel field, indeed, though my first novel was scrapped and the first to appear did so after a dozen rejections, I proceeded immediately to start another. It might yield a rate of payment in pence per hour—much less than I could earn by other forms of writing—but I was certain that I would derive infinite delight from the writing thereof, and complete relaxation and recreation.

While some aspirant novelists are rejected because they have nothing to say, others still

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And on the question of period let beginners beware of the deliberate 'old-fashioned' novel.

It is a curious fact that the period of about three generations back, perhaps the best part of a century, is old-fashioned in the minds of the masses. Before that it becomes 'period,' and therefore infinitely exciting and romantic. It is a slightly absurd and arbitrary ruling, but it exists.

Anything in Grandmother's or Great-grandmother's time is old-fashioned and pedantic, savouring secretly of resented discipline and restriction. Before that is a paradise for novelists, to be read with delight and envy.

Of course, there are exceptions, and the master-hand can produce a novel in any period and succeed; but the beginner, and even the progressing novelist, does well not to narrow his chances.

Another fault that distinguishes the expert from the inexperienced, quite apart from literary competence, is the ability to anticipate public demand, or, if not to anticipate, to be aware of the writing on the wall. This gift—for it can hardly be acquired, though it can be developed—

tender in actual experience set forth to 'tell the world.'

Inexperienced youth has a message containing much that is worth listening to, but maturity is ill-disposed to accept lectures from them, and that is why many novels are rejected.

"You can't put old heads on young shoulders, and if you did they wouldn't fit," the schoolboy said. This is worth remembering by potential novel-writers.

So too is the fact that hundreds of novels are rejected because they are old-fashioned in flavour. The basic principles of dress may be enduring, but these do not prevent frequent changes in superficial fashions. If they are not always commended they are of necessity condoned.

Writers, particularly when they are unknown and have no especial claim to preference, cannot afford to be old-fashioned either in theme or in language.

I have seen many good stories rejected because the whole atmosphere of the story, set in the age of aviation, was that of the period of hansom-cabs.

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is something akin to the news sense in a journalist. Book fashions go in waves: now a deluge of historical novels, now a feast of biographies, now a boom in detective fiction that has some claim to literary quality. Similar signs are apparent in almost all the arts.

These waves of interest gather force and break. The beginners do not observe the waves until they break; the expert sees their first gathering or even anticipates their forming.

If waves are created by chance participants help to make them swell their volume. If there is a sudden interest in, say, the Tudors the timely novelist has his period book appearing at the crest of the wave. For at least two years afterwards publishers will be flooded with Tudor books by beginners, who, when the wave broke, saw it and thought leisurely about utilizing its attractions.

I have mentioned earlier that the inexperienced writers of articles often suffer rejection because they have been too ambitious, selecting a subject too vast for their technical ability, a canvas too broad for their still experimental art. In the same way it is a mistake to crowd a novel

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with numerous characters before their 'producer' is very sure of his or her ability to handle them effectively.

Thousands of novels are rejected to-day because they have no story to tell.

Much post-War ephemeral fame has been awarded to superficial talent. A surface study of psychology, snappy conversation, a mistaking of licence for liberty, and a vicious cynicism are apparently enough to earn the rowdy applause of a large proportion of the reading public; but these qualities are not the ingredients of the novels that last, neither are they recommended to be used by aspirant writers who have a thought beyond their pocket.

I doubt whether there has ever been such a dearth of first-class story-tellers as there is to-day. But, of course, story-telling, in its best forms, implies not only talent, but hard work. The more easily the story reads, the more smoothly and convincingly its pattern develops, the more work has been put into it.

Publishers reject, and rightly, thousands of novels that have no real story, no background of physical activity, emotional conflicts, or spiritual

values. They do not plead for melodrama, though many of the merits of melodrama can be commended to novelists.

I saw the first night of Elmer Rice's *Judgment Day*—magnificent melodrama with a message. Melodrama is not my personal choice of ideal entertainment, but of its kind this play is brilliant, and a lesson to every writer. There is scarcely a potential ingredient of thrills, suspense, or surprise that is not in the play, hardly an emotion not played upon. And by sheer hard work, ingenuity, and a remarkable sense of theatre the author has combined them all in a workmanlike, swift, and enthralling play.

After seeing it one realizes anew the paucity of material in and the sketchiness of many scripts that pretend to be novels.

I am not a thriller fan. In my private reading violent action is one of the least-sought distractions; but I do know the inestimable value of story-telling. I know that publishers, quite rightly, would give much to find, and much more to encourage, anyone who had even a suggestion of the virility, the technical competence, the sheer story-telling ability, of, to mention only



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recent names, Conan Doyle, A. E. W. Mason, Edgar Wallace, Anthony Hope, Rider Haggard, and W. J. Locke.

The beginner who thinks that nowadays story-telling is no essential part of novel-writing is a fool. No true picture can ever be obtained of a profession by an examination only of a local and temporary manifestation. Even more misguided is the beginner who seeks to secure notice by writing an immoral novel. Reticence is momentarily old-fashioned, and freedom of writing has followed freedom of speech; but, while dirt is always a marketable quality in certain quarters, no novel written deliberately with a dirty mind, or, worse still, a mind deliberately dirty with commercial intent, has ever survived—or ever will—except in the sewer channels of pornography.

It is the experience of many publishers that Irish books do not sell, and that there are periods when war themes are anathema. Dialect in any form is, of course, always a deterrent to many, and books about Fleet Street are often failures. It is also true that, while a stage star may command a huge fan public, his or her biography

may fail to sell enough to be a commercial success.

There is an interesting cleavage in the ranks of fiction readers to-day which has already been noticed by many publishers, and must govern their rejections.

There is a vast demand for sheer entertainment, whether it be comedy or romance or adventure. There is also an ever-increasing demand for biographies, travel books, histories, and the many phases of reading which used to be suspect by all except the 'heavy' reader.

Between the two, and absorbing much of each, is a section which requires that its novels, while being entertainment, shall also interest and instruct; that they shall have a definite background which is informative; that they shall pose a current problem in the terms of individuals; that they shall, indeed, be concerned with something more than the 'superficials' of the setting they select.

A beginner's novel with a musical setting might be rejected because the publisher feels that the author has chosen it not because he knows anything about it, or has something to say about

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music of yesterday, to-day, or to-morrow, or because he can reveal anything of the anguish or exaltations of the musically minded, but because it is a decorative, faintly artistic setting which permits of a little temperament, exotic heroines, and "*Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix*" whenever inventiveness flags:

A novel can be set in Autopsia, if you will, because dictators are common conversation, because their unprecedented administrations permit of any happening, and save research into constitutional or police procedure, and do not require irksome necessity of finding exact and apposite geographical and topographical data.

Whereas, of course, in the old days of honest, if not always inspired, craftsmen these details were not shirked, and settings were chosen with a purpose and exploited for the interest and edification of the reader.

If an author has something to say and a gripping story to tell faults of writing are minor blemishes.

Inspiration cannot be controlled, though it can be developed, but novels will continue to be rejected until their authors accept as essential, and

continue to cultivate assiduously, a sense of construction.

The apparent ease of novel-writing, its sop to the vanity, are dangerous and frequent causes of rejection. So many novels are rejected because the authors have no sense of beauty, little interest in anything beyond themselves; and no facility of invention.

Many more are rejected for the intangible but important reason that there is nothing wrong with them, but there is nothing in them that will require the important critics to take notice of them. *They offer no wide and instant universal appeal which will commend them to those wider publics who are independent of critics and names,* but who know instinctively what they require and where to seek it.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE FUTURE TREND OF MARKETS

Radio Rejections—A Comparison of Methods and Means—The Changing Functions of Publications—Modern Tendencies that will be extended—A Forecast of Future Requirements—Getting the 'Feel' of Markets.

REJECTION slips are not yet associated in the minds of the masses with anything but publications. They are, however, now an accessory of broadcasting, and the potentialities of the spoken word are such that brief mention must inevitably be made of radio and its principles of rejection.

I doubt whether there is a single word in this book that would not be endorsed by a radio editor, except, perhaps, the insistence, in certain aspects, of the pictorial possibilities of material. These obviously do not apply to the word written to be spoken, but they have their counterpart in the radio's obvious insistence upon aural appeal. The publication has the advantage of illustrations to amplify, to elucidate, its offering; the radio has no opportunity of utilizing the eye, but

it has all the aural advantages of the theatre with which to 'produce' its material.

The radio is growing yearly more similar to the newspaper and publishing vehicle. It is inevitable, as its functions are parallel—the dissemination of news, views, and entertainment to the largest public in the most expeditious way that means will permit.

The radio has its national and provincial circulations, its local editions, its 'pages' devoted to various subjects which are, from time to time, as occasion warrants, developed into supplements or special editions.

The radio has its topicality angle and its seasonal appeal. In its major items it probably plans even farther ahead than most magazines. In its 'red-hot topicals' it has an advantage over the most enterprising newspaper. It can permit a man to speak to the nation within a minute of setting foot on our shores, whereas even the marvels of modern newspaper production cannot reduce the time factor to that extent, though they can supplement the swift dissemination of news with amazingly speedy pictures.

It is of interest, and not without its use to the

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thoughtful contributor, to speculate upon the trend of publications and broadcasting. I do not see radio as a deadly rival of the Press, but it is, if you will, a friendly enemy whose strength must be admitted and whose policy will inevitably cause more alteration in newspaper and magazine form than is already apparent, and changes to date are considerable.

Radio has taken the edge off news. It is scarcely possible nowadays for people in the mass to wake up and discover a shock of world importance in their morning newspapers. The night radio almost overlaps the morning paper, and the evening publication meets the competition of news bulletins which rob its news of all major surprises when the paper is brought home from the City.

Magazines also suffer to some extent by the competition, particularly in regard to major seasonal happenings. In the past a national event has meant a passing predominance in newspapers and an opportunity for weekly and monthly publications to 'spread themselves,' as we say in journalism, with supplements or special numbers. They have now the advantage of

rotogravure and colour—an inestimable advantage as yet not fully exploited—but they have also the competition of radio, which presents to the ear even more than the most enterprising publication can present to the eye.

It seems clear that the impingement of radio upon the public will result in a much clearer definition of the function of publications. The newspaper will become less an indiscriminate news-gatherer than an interpreter of and commentator upon current affairs. Its second and ever-increasing function will be entertainment.

Every form of the written and spoken word is adjusting its entertainment values. The need for sheer entertainment in the sense of complete distraction or soothing music, or its equivalent in print, will never pass. There is no reason why it should, for it has an admirable social function. The vast increase in the spread of education, the increasing proportion of people who think and study (for which increase the radio can take some credit), are creating a demand for amusement that is informative, helpful, and socially useful without losing its powers of distraction and relaxation. Observe the significantly increased



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interest in non-fiction books, the almost compulsory, but in many cases willing, interest in world affairs, where before the vision of millions was confined to their coastline, or even to the borders of their parish. Transport, travel, and the general speeding up and interchange of life have aided this excellent development, but they have made equally necessary a compact and easily assimilated form of information and recreation.

The 'tabloid' form of many newspapers, the advance of the 'strip' feature, are evidence of a desire to meet that modern requirement. They are likely to be extended in their present and in other directions. The compression of actual sentences until, as in several instances to-day, the material becomes not 'snappy' but absurd is probably a passing phase, an excess that can have no justification in the eyes of the discerning.

Actual 'hard news' tends to be more and more compressed, but what are expanded are relative comment and the presentation of a background that gives the events their right perspective. In the exercise of that function newspapers will become more and more valuable and more and more appreciated by the public.

If it was not for the films and their encouragement of outsize events and adjectives and a succession of shocks and surprises I think sensationalism in every section of the Press would diminish. There are signs that its appeal is diminishing to-day. If it is still supported it is not taken seriously, but more as an entertainment.

Newspapers, and even many magazines (which are assuming more and more a newsy, up-to-date flavour), will be required in the future to present the news, the relative facts, the trend of events before and the possible repercussions of the incident recorded, with reasoned argument and comment by people in a position to speak authoritatively.

Readers increasingly expect to be allowed to form their own judgment. Reasoning, not roaring, is becoming more and more potent and more and more profitable.

Never was it more essential for the outside contributor to get the 'feel' of the world of print and to adjust himself to the changes that are so subtle but so swift that the outsider is apt not to notice them.

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To the expert they are astonishing, and they are by no means completed.

It is the fact that the minds of many potential contributors run on the lines of ten years ago. From the point of view of acceptability they might as well take the Boer War standards as criteria. The whole outlook and aspect of the written word in all its manifestations have changed, and will continue to change remarkably every year.

To keep pace with these developments is necessary, to anticipate their movements intelligently is likely to be profitable, but even to appreciate that changes are taking place is an advantage. It is an advantage, nevertheless, that every editor will tell you few contributors have so far made their own.

## CHAPTER XV

# REJECTIONS THAT CANNOT BE FORESEEN

Policy Rejection—Editors plan ahead—Regular Features and Names—Limits of Stock and Expenditure—Factors the Contributor cannot foresee—Why Editors regret: an Unexpected Answer.

It is probable that many people will read this book so far and decide that none of the reasons offered accounts for their rejections. It is possible, though not probable, that they will be right. Sometimes, it must be confessed, it is extremely difficult for the outsider to gauge editorial requirements. Even accepting the fact that variety is essential in editing, especially when catering for a large public, there should be some limits within which the variety operates, some form and substance in the policy. Whereas, I am afraid, in several well-known markets it is completely impossible to define the policy.

This is sometimes due, particularly in the newspaper field, to the often frequent shifting of staffs and the complete lack of continuity of

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outlook. Not only does that section of the newspaper or periodical suffer, but the whole publication loses personality, which is a very vital loss.

There are some fiction markets apparently so cut and dried that before the publication is opened one can almost anticipate not only the type, but the actual setting and theme of the stories. Whether this is the result of sheer laziness, of lack of enterprise and courage, or whether the editor is too busy shaping his groove into his grave, the poor outside contributor cannot decide. Whatever the reason is, he or she would be well advised to look elsewhere for encouragement and progress.

But even with the most efficient editor and the most excellently suited contribution, there are many essentially editorial factors that must govern acceptance or rejection, none of which the contributor can be expected to realize.

For purposes of practical example let us take a magazine editor whose illustrated monthly includes fact and fiction. He probably works two months ahead, and plans two issues ahead of that.

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Many topical or seasonal articles, sent in good faith, will be too late. Many others will clash with material in hand.

No contributor can know an editor's stock without being in personal contact with him, and it is not unreasonable that an editor—who has not the smoothest job in the world—should confine his consultations to those who have proved that they can give him exactly what he wants—when he wants it.

He has to continue in a given issue a series started some months before. He must carry several 'names' that will mean something on his cover and are valuable for advertising.

If you are one of those disgruntled people who imagine that no one with a 'name' is any good, and you are infinitely better, I can do nothing for you. 'Names' were not born—they were made; and if you know of any other trade where you can make your name a household word in a few years, even assuming that you have genius, go to it, and good luck.

The editor is concerned probably with buying a factual article which carries a good title for his cover and is also broad in its appeal. It is essen-

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tial that it should not clash with any subject he had covered in recent months, that it should illustrate attractively, and that it should not overlap any subjects which he has planned for a special number two months ahead.

It may be that he prefers to commission this leading feature article, in which case he will apply the same criticisms to a submitted synopsis as to the finished script.

A contributor may have submitted an article upon a theme which, interesting in itself, will have, perforce, to be included on the score of topicality in the next year.

For example, an article on some aspect of Australia might be interesting in itself, but if the editor knows that there will be a royal visit to Australia a year ahead, and that he will then inevitably have to take account of it, the otherwise excellent article returns—and the editor hasn't always time to say just why.

The next article may contain a good idea badly handled, and the editor is not completely convinced that the author is capable of 'producing' it more efficiently. In order, therefore, to save the unknown contributor extra work and

undue encouragement, which in the end might be fruitless, he rejects the contribution.

Another submission is well written, well illustrated, sound in structure and argument, but it is machine-made. The editor doubts whether the author knows his subject intimately, whether he has put anything in that could not have been included by another writer with a good library and supplementary newspaper cuttings.

Never were personality in writing and freshness in the angle of approach more valuable.

You must have observed, in a cinema, how an unexpected angle of approach, a different 'slant,' will make the most ordinary scene not only infinitely more interesting, but surprisingly diverting. There is no sin in being up to date.

Another script, in an excess of enthusiasm, is seasonal for a year ahead. It arrives, say, in July, when an editor is beginning to think about Christmas. If the editor is human he thinks that the fond contributor imagines him, in July, to be planning his August number. If he is extraordinarily charitable he thinks, "This is an enterprising contributor—sending eight months ahead." But he is not altogether prepared to



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commit himself on likely material eight months ahead. Anything might have happened by then; any new situation or interest may have developed. He has probably commissioned articles for eight months ahead, but they are his major contributions, by established writers whose names he must have and whose work will not disappoint him. Those are his branded goods—his window display, if you will. It is the odd three or four, what I might call 'floating,' contributions that he buys from outsiders. And because even the editor who plans months ahead likes to be as 'topical' as possible in the circumstances he hesitates to commit himself to capacity.

Let me say that none of these doubts applies to the exceptional contribution. An alert editor's life is full not only of rejections, but of regrets. He or she is continually deploring the spate of contributions with which there is nothing wrong, but nothing outstanding. The contribution that an editor prays for—and so seldom sees—is that which he simply must have, even if he cannot use it for months, the article or feature that is "right up our street."

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Perhaps my enthusiasm is unseemly—if it is I am unrepentant—but I rub my hands with glee when something exactly suitable and outstanding comes my way, a manuscript that conforms to requirements of length, whose theme and presentation are bright and effective, whose characters are real and living, whose dialogue is crisp, whose descriptive work is vivid, whose suspense is unstrained, and whose pictorial possibilities are excellent.

All these qualifications are perhaps not essential in any one script, but the reader will have gathered what I mean. The dearth of excellent material is so real that I cannot imagine any prominent editor refusing to buy such a script on sight.

I say 'prominent' not in any sense of criticism of editors of smaller publications, but because the question of finance concerns all of us who are in a position to buy written material.

The editor of a leading group of magazines or newspapers has call on thousands of pounds, but even internationally known magazines and newspapers have their economic limits, and they, like

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publishers, are not philanthropists. There will always be something beyond even their reach, and all of us, in our descending scales, have our limits of expenditure, and they govern not only our purchases, but our rejections.

In those commendable houses that pay on acceptance, for example, an editor hesitates to run the debit against his department up to mountainous heights. Every one must draw the line somewhere, and although, certainly in my own experience, no outstanding material has ever been rejected because of a very heavy stock-in-hand this factor must to some extent govern one's decision with regard to material that is good, and which, in more lean times, would probably be bought for stock.

It often happens that an editor will reject useful material because he is overstocked with that particular author's work, or with stories concerned with its particular period or setting. The stimulation of acceptance often stirs a beginner to an excess of submissions to the particular market concerned.

Such factors are not always explained to the contributor, but they are common to every

kind of business, and their existence must be accepted.

What is much more essential to success is to realize at the outset that writing is not a get-rich-quickly profession. It has to be learned, and its apprenticeship is no longer—and no shorter—than that required by many another trade or profession. A few editors are incredibly lazy, a few more appear to have no rhyme or reason in their policy, a few more may have favourites, and some may be susceptible to the fair sex; but these are exceptions, and the sum of them is no considerable part of the whole.

Never, even the contributor will admit, has competition in every form of writing and publishing been more acute and more relentless than it is to-day. It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that the majority of editors are good at their job, and I personally cannot see how an editor can be consistently good at his job without being ever receptive of new ideas, without continually seeking and encouraging new talent. He or she must select material, without fear or favour, on the basis of a sound, sane, and progressive policy.

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Let me leave out the 'why' of this title for a moment and say, "Editors regret . . ." And the answer, so often repeated as to be monotonous, is, "*that contributors are not honest with themselves.*"

I do beg of you to believe that statement. I was a free-lance myself for years without the alleged benefit of a single introduction or a single 'friend at Court.'

If you would learn and progress—and this book has been written with the desire to aid—do believe that four out of five rejections are the result of giving an editor *not* what he wants, but what you think he ought to want.

In pleading the merits of an unknown person's novel to a publisher recently I said that the author had written every day for two years without the encouragement of a single cheque or a single word in print.

I said that that was either a form of certifiable insanity or—as I preferred to believe, having done the same thing myself—a sign of latent talent.

At the moment that novel is on its fourth journey, but neither the author nor myself has

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lost faith in it. I hope this little book has done something to restore your faith, but let that faith crystallize into conviction. The conviction should be that writing is the grandest game in the world, not that editors reject for the sheer malicious love of it.

## CHAPTER XVI

### RECOMMENDED READING

So many readers of my previous books have asked for reading suggestions that I feel I cannot fail them.

It will be obvious, however, that there must inevitably be some duplication, and the field in this case is very restricted. In my previous books I suggested volumes that illustrated the arguments of my various chapters and were concerned with a particular phase of writing or marketing. The basic reference library of the writer was also suggested in detail. I cannot do better than to commend these lists, which are too long to repeat here, and to draw further attention to a few of the volumes, with some additions, that may assist and encourage the person who has just finished reading this book.

Arnold Bennett's *The Author's Craft* (Hodder and Stoughton) is always helpful, and much of the atmosphere of modern journalism and

publishing can be obtained from Low Warren's *Journalism from A to Z* (Herbert Joseph) and *Journalism as a Career*, edited by W. T. Cranfield (Pitman).

These are an entirely personal preference, but I never cease to recommend to writers at every stage *The Art of Thinking*, by Ernest Dimnet (Cape); *Through Literature to Life*, by Ernest Raymond (Cassell); and *The Truth about Publishing*, by Stanley Unwin (Allen and Unwin).

For those who seek the perplexities or delights of ultra-modern style any of the works of William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, or Ernest Hemingway should be instructive. They are so much more intelligent than their innumerable and often anæmic imitators.

Those desiring to refresh their memories with the prose style of the masters may be grateful for the compact Everyman's volume *An Anthology of English Prose*. The one, to me painful, failing of this excellent selection is that it omits John Henry Newman. If the omission, however, sends the reader searching for Newman's *Apologia* it will be, in its way, as valuable as the



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tirades of Charles Kingsley which brought forth the *Apologia*.

Personally I always find encouragement in an anthology of English poetry, say, *Great Poems of the English Language* (Harrap). Its inspiration can be prevented from becoming too impracticable by absorbing the astringent qualities of *The Marketing of Literary Property*, by G. Herbert Thring (Constable) and *The King's English*, by H. W. and F. G. Fowler (Oxford University Press).

If, after supplementing such selections with a reading of your latest manuscripts, you are still game the writing urge is surely in you; you may well be one of those who have ink in their veins, and whose hearts beat the faster because of it.

There still remains, however, the necessity of toiling intelligently and unceasingly. If you are cast in the right mould there will never be need to make a virtue of this necessity; it will be an abiding pleasure.